

# The mutual corruption of volition and nature? A closer reading of *Ad Thalassium* 42

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This article closely examines the content of an important passage in Maximos the Confessor's *Ad Thalassium* 42, in which we can identify a ternary soteriological structure (Adam-Christ-us) recurring in the work of the Byzantine theologian. The main focus of the article is to highlight and analyse the relationship that he evokes, but does not detail, between human nature and the exercise of will – in the case of Adam, as the protological and lapsarian exemplar of humanity; in the case of Christ, as its teleological and soteriological exemplar; and in the case of us, as natural descendants of the former and possible spiritual followers of the latter.

**Contribution:** This article highlights a general soteriological structure and the circular dynamics between nature and will as the central anthropological mechanism of this structure, both of which are relevant to Maximos the Confessor's entire work in general and to his moral psychology, including his concept of the passions, in particular.

**Keywords:** nature; volition; soteriology; *Ad Thalassium* 42; Maximos the Confessor.

## Introduction

Known, studied and quoted, the 42nd piece of the well-known work *Responses to Thalassios* by the famous Byzantine theologian and saint Maximos the Confessor (c. 580–662) does not, however, enjoy much attention.<sup>1</sup> Maximian scholarship seems to place it in a role of additional reference, of checking ideas presented with more performance elsewhere in the work. In the continuation of a research started to elucidate the possible understanding of addictive behaviours from the perspective of the Eastern Patristic concept of passion, passing through the unravelling of a general model of human behaviour, both investigated in the writings of St. Maximos the Confessor,<sup>2</sup> the present essay dwells on *Response 42* (hereafter *QT 42*) to examine more closely what it says explicitly and, especially, what it suggests, namely a dynamic, mutual relationship between human nature and its manifestation in the act of exercising the will, in the case of Adam, as the protological and lapsarian exemplar of humanity, of Christ, as its teleological and soteriological exemplar, and in our case, the natural descendants of the former and the would-be spiritual followers of the latter.

In the following, the article will first summarise this Response, re-reading its most significant elements, and then appreciate its role in the broader context of St. Maximos' whole opera. Next, the article will address the question of the relationship between nature and will, an anthropological and moral couple at the centre of the author's attention and of the present research. In the conclusion, the relevance of this relationship to the issue of passions and addictions is discussed.

## What we read in *QT 42*

*QT 42* is a short text in which the author responds to the request of his correspondent to clarify the meaning of the Pauline verse 'He who did not know sin, was made sin for us' (2 Cor 5:21): because it seems more serious an offense for someone to do a sin without knowing it, than to do it and know it – perhaps to acknowledge and confess it, as is the case of repentance – what did St. Paul actually mean here about Christ?<sup>3</sup>

1. Important monographs like Heinzer (1980), Bathrellos (2004) or Summerson (2020) barely mention it; it is more valued by Thunberg (1995), Larchet (1996), and especially by Larchet (1998).

2. See previous pieces in Moldovan (2020, 2021).

3. For the Greek text of *Ad Thalassium*, the present author uses the editions of Sources Chrétiennes (Maxime le Confesseur 2010, 2012), with the number of the corresponding lines in brackets. For the English translation, the author follows Conostas (Maximos the Confessor 2018:241–245), with a few modifications. The most important one concerns his option for 'volition' or 'will' instead of Conostas' 'free choice' to translate προαιρέσις, which Maximos uses here in a comprehensive sense, meaning the whole volitional act, in pair with the comprehensive meaning of nature, and not as a specific, central part of this act, as for example in his *Opusculum* 1. When a more concrete exercise of volition is meant, the author uses 'will' to suggest that meaning.

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The answer given is characteristic of Maximus' usual style: 'in many ways [and] succinctly' (πολλαχῶς ... κατ' ἐπιτομήν [73]), as he himself describes it. We can easily recognise in it three sections and a conclusion.

In the first section, Maximus identifies two meanings of the notion of sin (ἁμαρτία), distinguishing between sin as a wilful violation of God's commandment – here with reference to Adam's sin (Gn 3), which he describes as a first corruption (φθορά), consisting in falling (ἐκπτώσις) 'from the good toward evil' – and sin as the negative consequence of this violation on human nature, which occurred without Adam's will, which he describes as a second corruption (συνέφθειρεν), consisting in 'alteration of nature from incorruptibility to corruption' (ἐξ ἀφθαρσίας εἰς φθοράν... μεταποίησις [12]). Based on the distinction between a voluntary action and its involuntary consequences, Maximus states that sin in the first sense, manifested at the level of the will, is blameworthy (εὐδιάβλητος), while in the second sense, manifested as consequences on human nature, it is blameless (ἀδιάβλητος):

Thus two sins came about in the forefather through his transgression of the divine commandment: the first was blameworthy, but the second was blameless, having been caused by the first. The first was a sin of volition, which voluntarily abandoned the good, but the second was of nature, which involuntarily and as a consequence of volition lost its immortality.<sup>4</sup>

Maximos continues the first section applying the distinction of the two senses of the sin according to the volition-nature binomial to Christ and his work of salvation: in order to restore humanity corrupted by primordial sin (in both its senses), he becomes man and assumes the corrupted nature (sin in the second, consequential, blameless sense), but not the corrupted volition (sin in the first, operative, blameworthy sense). In this way, Christ corrects and rightens both wickedness produced by Adam, that of volition and that of nature:

In this way, just as the alteration of nature from incorruptibility to corruption came to all men through one man, who voluntarily turned his will away from the good, so too, through one man, Jesus Christ, who did not turn His faculty of will away from the good, the restoration of nature from corruption to incorruptibility came to all men.<sup>5</sup>

The connection of this Adam–Christ parallel with the famous passage of Romans 5:12 ff. is obvious (which is probably why he does not mention it), a passage which Maximus interprets precisely in the sense of the mentioned distinction,<sup>6</sup> but through another important text, also not mentioned, namely

4. Δύο γὰρ ἁμαρτίαι γεγόνασιν ἐν τῷ προπάτορι κατὰ τὴν παράβασιν τῆς θείας ἐντολῆς, ἡ μὲν διαβεβλημένη, ἡ δὲ ἀδιάβλητος, αἰτίαν ἔχουσα τὴν διαβεβλημένην, καὶ ἡ μὲν προαιρέσεως, ἐκουσίως ἀποθεμένης τὸ ἀγαθόν, ἡ δὲ φύσεως, ἀκουσίως διὰ τὴν προαίρεσιν ἀποθεμένης τὴν ἀθανασίαν' [13–17].

5. Καὶ γέγονεν, ὡσπερ δι' ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου τραπέντος ἐκουσίως ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ τὴν προαίρεσιν εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους ἡ τῆς φύσεως ἐξ ἀφθαρσίας εἰς φθοράν μεταποίησις, οὕτως δι' ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, μὴ τραπέντος ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ τὴν προαίρεσιν, εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους ἡ τῆς φύσεως ἐκ φθορᾶς εἰς ἀφθαρσίαν ἀποκατάστασις' [27–33].

6. The Adam–Christ parallel plays a prominent role in St Maxim's thought (see especially QT 21, 61, *Amb* 42).

Hebrews 4:15, where it is stated about Christ that he was 'tempted in all things after our likeness, except sin'.

If to this first section we add the conclusion, the answer is already sufficient and could be closed here. However, its author supplements two more, apparently redundant, sections. Each of them resumes the previous explanation of Christ's work of restoration in contrast to the fall brought about by Adam, both in the same differential key of the will-nature binomial. On closer examination, however, we can see that the author's hermeneutical attention is differently focused, in the second section on the role of the will and in the third section on the consequences of its exercise for nature.

Indeed, the second section mentions not only Adam's will and Christ's will, but also God's will and, in addition, the author's own will. In the foreground here are Adam's sinful exercise, 'for evil', of his will, which Maximus describes by the expression 'turning away of will' (τροπή τῆς προαιρέσεως [35]) and Christ's sinless exercise, 'for good', of his will, described as 'immutability of will' (ἀτρεπία τῆς προαιρέσεως [23–24]), each with its specific consequences: for the first, the 'rescinding of the common glory of nature's incorruptibility' and the appearance of 'passibility, corruption, and mortality' (πάθος καὶ φθοράν καὶ θάνατον [56; cf. 52]), and for the second, the 'taking away of the common disgrace of corruption from the whole of nature' and the acquisition of 'impassibility, incorruptibility, and immortality' (ἀπαθές καὶ ἄφθαρτον καὶ ἀθάνατον [53]). While in the first section Maximus merely states that these consequences are involuntary, this time he offers the explanation that they occur by a 'judging of God' (κρίναντος τοῦ Θεοῦ [47]). This is an important point, to which the article will return later.

Also, interesting here is the sudden change of expression from the third person, designating Adam, to the first person, after having immediately before mentioned the universal character of the consequences in Adam and Christ as well. The first person appears both in the singular, designating the author, and in the plural, designating the addressee, the possible readers, and, generically, all people as beneficiaries of Christ's economy, but only in the singular does the first person explicitly assume both the will – 'my sin' (τὴν ἐμὴν ἁμαρτίαν [34]) – and the nature – 'sin because of me' (τὴν δι' ἐμὲ ἁμαρτίαν [36]). The effect of this focus on subjectivity is one of emphasising personal responsibility, but also the quality of receiver of the justification in Christ:

The Lord did not know my sin, that is, the turning away of my free will: He did not assume my sin, neither did He become my sin, but [*He became*] sin because of me; He assumed the corruption of nature which came about through the turning away of my free choice, and He became, for our sake, man passible by nature, abolishing my sin through the sin that came about because of me.<sup>7</sup>

7. Τὴν ἐμὴν οὖν μὴ γνοῦς ἁμαρτίαν ὁ Κύριος, τούτεστι τὴν τροπήν τῆς ἐμῆς προαιρέσεως, τὴν ἐμὴν οὐκ ἔλαβεν ἁμαρτίαν οὔτε γέγονεν, ἀλλὰ τὴν δι' ἐμὲ [γένονεν] ἁμαρτίαν, τούτεστι τὴν διὰ τὴν τροπήν τῆς ἐμῆς προαιρέσεως φθοράν τῆς φύσεως, ἀναλαβών, ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν γέγονε φύσει παθητὸς ἄνθρωπος, διὰ τῆς δι' ἐμὲ ἁμαρτίας τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνελών ἁμαρτίαν' [34–39].

In the third and final section, Maximus' attention focuses on the consequences of the protagonists' actions. Paradoxically, Adam's responsibility for the consequences of his disobedience – listed repeatedly, after he had already detailed them at the end of the previous section – is here reinforced: these were not from the beginning, that is, from God, but Adam worked and knew (ἐποίησε δὲ καὶ ἔγνω [58]) this negative transformation of nature (μεταποίησις [58]) through the creation (δημιουργήσας [59]) of sin. God's previously stated role as judge is more blurred; in the foreground instead comes the result of his will regarding Adam's deed, namely, the condemnation (κατάκρισις [55]) to death, but this too is described as the offspring (γέννημα [59]) of sin, thus imputable to Adam.

Through the paradox of an unintended consequence attributable to a guilty person, Maximus highlights the other, greater paradox of the voluntary assumption of this consequence by an innocent person, and the idea that what Christ achieves in this way is the condemnation of Adam's condemnation, that is, the reversal of the consequence decreed by God for sin, but, again paradoxically, not by contradicting the logic of this decision, but precisely by affirming it. In the words of the author:

The condemnation of my freely chosen sin [...] was assumed by the Lord, who for my sake became sin [...], voluntarily by nature assuming my condemnation – though He is without condemnation in His free choice – so that He might condemn the sin of my free choice and nature as well as my condemnation, simultaneously expelling sin, passibility, corruption, and death from nature, [...] for my sake and out of His love for mankind, voluntarily appropriated my condemnation through His death, through which He granted that I be called back and restored to immortality.<sup>8</sup>

This quotation reveals not only the summary of *QT 42*, but also that of the entire soteriology of St. Maximus – and of the Byzantine tradition – which we find, like a red thread, in various aspects and details in most of the responses in *QT* and in almost the rest of Maximus' opera and which has at its centre a two-act play, namely, the tragedy of the fall produced by Adam and its counteracting by Christ, through a wonderful exchange.<sup>9</sup> Borrowing the terminology of *Amb 10.28*, slightly different from that of *QT 42*, if Adam, seeking life for himself, gave birth to death as a mortal life, Christ, the Life itself, appropriated precisely this death to restore us to immortality.

However, the two acts of the play always have an epilogue, which is the subjective soteriology, the appropriation of salvation by each of us, a decisive aspect, which Maximus

8. Ταύτην δὲ τῆς ἐμῆς προαιρετικῆς ἀμαρτίας τὴν κατάκρισιν, ... ὁ Κύριος λαβὼν ἀμαρτία γέγονε ... τὴν ἐμὴν ἔκουσιως ὑποδύς φύσει κατάκρισιν, ἀκατάκριτος ὑπάρχων τὴν προαίρεσιν, ἵνα τὴν ἐμὴν προαιρετικὴν τε καὶ φυσικὴν ἀμαρτίαν καὶ κατάκρισιν κατακρίνη, κατὰ ταύτων ἀμαρτίαν καὶ πάθος καὶ φθορὰν καὶ θάνατον ἐξωθήσας τῆς φύσεως ... τῆς ἐμῆς ἔνεκεν σωτηρίας τὴν ἐμὴν ἔκουσιως οἰκειουμένου διὰ τοῦ θανάτου κατάκρισιν, καὶ δι' αὐτῆς χαριζομένου μοι τὴν πρὸς ἀθανάσιον ἀνάκλησιν' [60–72].

9. This is what Summerson very aptly discerned as the guiding theme in the whole *Ad Thalassium*. He mainly examines *QT 1*, 21, 61, but quotes here *QT 60*: 'By his passion he grants to our nature apatheia, and by his sufferings, liberation, and by his death, eternal life' (Summerson 2020:52). This theme is the kernel of the more general ternary soteriological scheme.

emphasises in various ways, here precisely by recourse to the voice of the first person.<sup>10</sup>

## The relevance of *QT 42*

Looking at *QT 42* against the whole of the *Responses* and, further on, with the entire Maximian corpus, it is evident that this answer provides us – briefly indeed – with the structural paradigm of a Christocentric soteriology, a structure formed on the trinomial Adam-Christ-us through which the Byzantine theologian orchestrates the fundamental themes of his thought – such as the origin and meaning of human existence, the condition and constitution of humans, in the various existential regimes that they go through (protological, lapsarian and post-lapsarian, Christological, arethological and eschatological) – as well as his fundamental concepts, such as those of divine *logoi*, nature, powers, hypostasis, energy, relationship, volition, passivity, activity, use, virtue, and passion, all of them in the dynamics of their characteristic manifestations of these regimes.

This structure faithfully expresses the series of paradoxes that *QT 42* highlights, especially the specific mode of the economy of salvation. A glance at the graphical representation of this Response (see Figure 1) helps us to see that salvation, as a redress of the fall, could have had other modalities. For example, the direct correction by God of the corrupted human will and, consequently, the granting of the incorruptibility of nature, that is, immortality or eternal life (see Figure 1, the V-arrow). Another way of fulfilling this original purpose of creation would be God's direct correction of human nature affected by sin, corruption and death and the granting, as a pardon for Adam's condemnation, of sinlessness, incorruptibility and immortality (see Figure 1, the N-arrow). Both options would represent our salvation, without us, however. The first would nullify the role of human self-determination, which Maximus vehemently rejects precisely by defending the human volition in the person of Christ in the polemic against monothelitism. The second would represent the universal salvation of all people, regardless of their voluntary relation to Christ's work of salvation, a view that seems difficult to ascribe to Maximus, at least in this place.<sup>11</sup>

In the mode of the economy of salvation achieved by the incarnation and activity of Christ, neither human volition is annulled, nor nature is restored regardless of the exercise of will. Instead of simple, direct ways of salvation, the 'mystery of Christ' (*QT 60*) operates in a wonderful, paradoxical,

10. A very similar passage to *QT 42* appears in *QT 62*, in which Maximus also resorts to the same first person when talking about the two curses 'I was subject to' (Maximos the Confessor 2018:454–455). On this personal appropriation of doing theology, see Summerson (2020:52 sq) and, at length, Steven (2020).

11. There is a serious controversy about eschatological universalism in Maximus which cannot even be summarised here. In any case, *QT 42* suggests that Christ's work can have only two meanings: either the opening of a possibility of salvation whose individual appropriation presupposes a certain synergy with him, or simply the attribution of the result of his work to all humans, regardless of their own voluntary commitment. At first glance the text seems compatible with such an attribution, especially as it underplays subjective soteriology, but it is not at all clear how we could still keep it compatible with the ubiquity and emphasis on precisely this soteriology in the rest of the work. In fact, accepting the attribution variant would practically amount to substituting humans in the drama of salvation. See Andreopoulos (2015) for a recent overview.

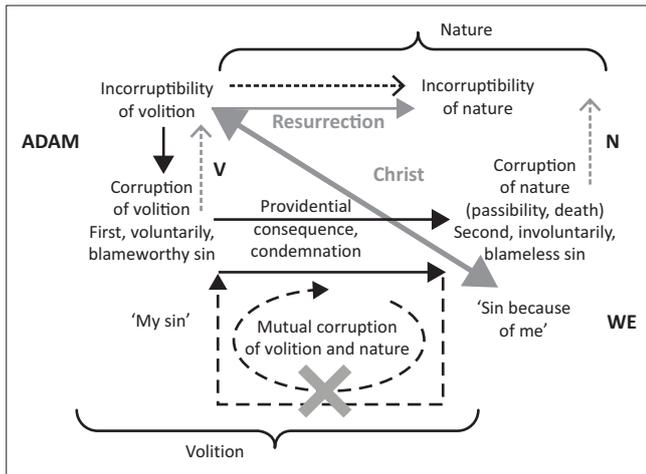


FIGURE 1: The soteriological structure and dynamics.

'diagonal' way by uniting fallen nature with restored volition, more precisely by exercising the will in a way that corresponds to the divine *logoi* of human existence precisely in the conditions of a human nature affected by the fall; it is the way that saves both dimensions of the human constitution, fulfilling the purpose of creation and, mainly, gives each individual a personal role in achieving his or her own salvation. While the ways of salvation orthogonal to the human condition would have compromised its subjective significance, it is this dialogical way, which projects itself equally onto both dimensions, nature, and volition, that fully engages them, giving the largest content to personal participation in the realisation of salvation.

Although *QT 42* focuses on the Adam-Christ binomial, the 'new mystery' (καινὸν μυστήριον [68])<sup>12</sup> through which Christ counter-acts the tragedy of Adam's fall ultimately turns attention to the first person, that is, to each of us, and places the soteriological stake on how the interaction of nature and volition takes place in our own existential trajectory. But this directing of attention to our role as Adam's heirs remains, at least at first glance, unrewarding, because that role is only evoked here, not presented. The situation is all the more interesting if we compare this text with similar ones.

## A brief comparative overview

A careful comparison between *QT 42* and the closest passages in *Ad Thalassium*, namely *QT Intro*, *QT 21* and *QT 61*, is significant in what it reveals as having in common as well as in what is differing. In all four answers, the same ternary Adam-Christ-us structure can be identified,<sup>13</sup> but the roles are highlighted differentially, depending on the hermeneutical context of the question and the edifying purpose of the answer. We can also identify a more particular ideational affinity between *QT Intro* and *QT 21*, on the one hand, and *QT 42* and *QT 61*, on the other hand. The main common element in the first pair is the ontogenetic component of the

12.The text in *PG 90*, 408D has it here κοινὸν μυστήριον, an interesting, not absurd variant, given the universalist approach made by Maximus in this Response.

13.Of course, with different details and touches. For further argument and similar graphic illustrations, see Moldovan (2021).

genetic mechanism of the fall<sup>14</sup> (detailed in *QT Intro*) and the solving of this mechanism by Christ (detailed in *QT 21*), while the common element in the second pair is the significance of the consequences that this pathological mechanism triggers and how precisely these consequences constitute the premises of the restoration in Christ. In fact, a paragraph of the first section ('He corrected the passibility of nature [...], making the end of nature's passibility, [...] into the beginning of the transformation of our nature into incorruptibility') and the entire third section of this Response are taken up and developed at length in *QT 61*, the theme of which is precisely the reversal of the meaning of death as a result of sin through what he calls, here and there, 'the condemnation of condemnation' (κατάκρισιν κατακρίνη [66]).

Returning to the overall comparison with the other three Responses, what stands out in *QT 42* is not so much that our role, as Adam's heirs and Christ's recipients, though certainly evoked, is not fully addressed (our role is even more blurred in *QT 21*), but that the relationship between human action and its consequences on human nature, though the hermeneutical key to the Response, remains only sketched, in contrast to the more detailed analyses devoted to various aspects of this relationship in the other places. But the article will now follow this outline more closely in *QT 42*.

## The volition – nature correlation

At first glance, their relationship appears unidirectional, from volition to nature: in both Adam and Christ, a certain exercise of personal will entails consequences for the condition of nature. However, apart from the opposite sense in which the two exercise their will and the quite opposite consequences entailed, there is another difference, which Maximus only suggests: in the case of Adam, the sinful exercise of the will immediately entails negative consequences, whereas in the case of Christ the consequences of the sinless exercise of his human will appear, 'through the resurrection' (διὰ τῆς ἀναστάσεως [54]) and 'by the resurrection' (κατὰ τὴν ἀνάστασιν [45]), as he put it. It is not clear whether he has in mind here the resurrection of Christ or the universal resurrection; most likely both, because everything Christ does is 'for us' (ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν [22, 38]). But what happens until the resurrection is an equally relevant question. Maximus says something, without elaboration, only about what happens with Christ until his resurrection, namely, that he assumes corrupt human nature, but exercises his human will in an uncorrupted way, certainly during his earthly life. The role of this coexistence and correlation of nature and volition in Christ is fundamental because it is precisely through the paradoxical conjunction of the two that the rightening of not only nature – which it explicitly affirms – but also of the volition – which is implicit in the uncorrupted way in which he says Christ exercises the will – takes place. Now, although nature appears as the final – and, as such, the major – term of the correlation, both in the case of its corruption by the corrupted will in Adam and in the case of its restoration by the righteous will of Christ, the exercise of the will is the active and, as such, the decisive aspect of the nature's fate.

14.See extensively in Moldovan (2021).

Moreover, the first term of the correlation is in fact nature, because it represents what humans receive through the act of divine creation, in Adam's case by original creation; in the case of humans, phylogenetically, through heredity; and, in Christ's case, through free assumption. This means that there should also be a directed relation from nature to volition, that is, their relation must in fact be mutual or bidirectional. And, indeed, Maximos gives us some hints in this regard, some direct, some indirect.

He directly indicates this connection when he says of Christ: 'He became, for our sake, man passible by nature, abolishing my sin through the sin that came about because of me'. That means, it is by assuming the corrupt nature that Christ accomplishes the correction of the corrupt volition. Likewise, at the end of the Response, recapitulating the distinction between the two meanings of the term 'sin', after stating that sin in the proper, operative sense represents separation from God, the author adds that sin in the secondary, consequential sense 'quite often hinders evil, not permitting the evil of our will to proceed to the level of action, because of the weakness of nature' (τὸ δὲ κακίας πολλακίς γίνεται κωλυτικόν, μὴ συγχωροῦν εἰς ἔργον προβῆναι, διὰ τὴν φυσικὴν ἀσθένειαν, τὴν κακίαν τῆς προαιρέσεως [83–85]). At least certain aspects – not displayed here – of the corrupt nature play a preventive role against the corrupt, sinful exercise of the will.

Indirectly, the existence of a nature-volition determination becomes apparent if we approach and compares two distant statements in the text:

'Our Lord and Savior corrected this mutual corruption and alteration of nature when He assumed the whole of our nature, and by virtue of the assumed nature He too possessed passibility adorned by the incorruptibility of His will' and '[...] so that He might condemn the sin of my will and nature as well as my condemnation, simultaneously expelling sin, passibility, corruption, and death from nature'.<sup>15</sup>

Remarkable in the second statement is the association of the terms in the pairs *volition-nature* and *sin-condemnation*, although up to this point they appear associated differently, as *volition-sin* and *nature-condemnation*. One may wonder what the significance of a third possible association of the terms in two pairs would be, namely *nature-sin* and *condemnation-volition*. The inquisitiveness is not gratuitous if we note that, in fact, the author does make the association *nature-sin* in the continuation of the same sentence, when he includes sin as a corruption of volition in the list of corruptions removed by Christ *from nature*. If it is possible that sin has somehow entered the nature – from where Christ removes it – would it not be logical to also suppose the existence of a condemnation of volition, that is, a compulsion to sin exercised by the corrupted nature on the will? Precisely such

15. Ταύτην οὖν τὴν διάλληλον φθορὰν τε καὶ ἀλλοίωσιν τῆς φύσεως ὁ Κύριος ἡμῶν καὶ Θεὸς διορθοῦμενος, ὀλοκλήρον τὴν φύσιν λαβὼν, εἶχε καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν τῇ ληφθείσῃ φύσει τὸ παθητὸν τῇ κατὰ προαίρεσιν ἀφθαρσίᾳ κοσμοῦμενον [18–21] [...] ἵνα τὴν ἐμὴν προαιρετικὴν τε καὶ φυσικὴν ἁμαρτίαν καὶ κατὰ κρισιν κατακρίνη, κατὰ ταῦτον ἁμαρτίαν καὶ πάθος καὶ φθορὰν καὶ θάνατον ἐξωθήσας τῆς φύσεως' [65–68]. The two can be considered as a single statement, which textually and semantically includes the core of the whole Response.

a possibility Maximos indirectly indicates in several places, either by denying it in the case of Christ, when he says that Christ, though assuming the corruption of nature, is completely free from the corruption of volition, or by affirming the rightening of the volition in Christ, as we have seen. It is what the first of the statements quoted above also indicates, if Christ's 'adorning' (κοσμοῦμενον [21]) of the corrupt nature with an incorrupt volition represents, not a mere, curious juxtaposition of the two, but rather the antithetical, positive alternative to the inclusion of the corrupt volition in the corrupted nature spoken of in the second of the quoted statements. Both alternatives confirm an association between (corrupt) nature and (corrupt/incorrupt) volition.

Also remarkable is a statement in the first phrase, 'this mutual corruption and alteration of nature' (τὴν διάλληλον φθορὰν τε καὶ ἀλλοίωσιν τῆς φύσεως [18–19]), which seems to refer, by repetition, only to the corruption of nature, though neither here nor further on does Maximos make any reference to more pathological aspects of nature that would condition each other.<sup>16</sup> Might not 'corruption of nature' and 'alteration of volition' rather be here the proper terms in mutual relationship?<sup>17</sup> There is no proof for this in *QT 42* beyond any doubt. But the central argument of the Response, about the 'diagonal' way of salvation, the only one that gives humans a role in this drama, warrants this interpretation. If nature had no influence on volition, why would Christ's incorruptible manifestation and preservation of the human volition be so important, so wonderful, given the assumption of nature's corruptibility? Of course, Maximos emphasises the unchangeability or steadfastness (ἀτρεψία [24, 48, 56]) of Christ's will in contrast to the versatility (τροπή [36, 38, 54]) of Adam's will,<sup>18</sup> each with its consequences on nature. But if we look at it from our perspective, significant differences emerge: unlike Adam, we inherit a corrupt nature, in the first instance, we do not generate it as a result of a corrupted will; and unlike Christ, we cannot alone preserve the incorruptibility of volition (otherwise his incarnation and work would perhaps be useless). What Christ achieves in his humanity is precisely 'for us', in order to give *us*, too, the possibility of achieving an incorrupt exercise of our will in the conditions of the corruption and weakness of nature. An expression like 'called back to immortality' (τὴν πρὸς ἀθανασίαν ἀνάκλησιν [72]) may precisely suggest this new condition and experience, especially if we read it in contrast with 'the man who had used his will for evil' (τὸν κακισθέντα τὴν προαίρεσιν ἄνθρωπον [43]) or 'the evil of our will' (τὴν κακίαν τῆς προαιρέσεως [85]), the former with reference to Adam, the latter with reference to us.

16. The enumeration of passibility, corruption and mortality does not seem to suggest any significant distinction between them except for a degree of intensity of corruption and perhaps a chronological sequence.

17. ἀλλοίωσις is no longer used in *QT 42*, but has a total of seven occurrences in *Ad Thalassium*. In four of these (*QT 42*, 53, 60, 61), it appears in relation to nature; in two of them (*QT 54*, 64) it appears in relation to volition; and in one place (*QT 65*, where the adjectival form also appears), it refers to both.

18. The two terms appear three times each, once in direct opposition (52, 54). Also, τρέπω appears three times (29, 32, 50), once about Adam, and twice, with negation, about Christ.

## A mutual relationship?

The claim that what nature suffers as a result of the sinful exercise of the will is an involuntary consequence from a human perspective, but an intended one from a divine perspective is a recurring statement in the writings of Maximos and deserves closer examination.<sup>19</sup> The idea that God punishes with pedagogical intent is a constant in the Judeo-Christian tradition,<sup>20</sup> but the nuance of interest to us is that this divine corrective intent has a correspondent in the dynamics of nature, a correspondent which Maximos calls in *QT 52* ‘a divine rule and law within created beings’.<sup>21</sup> A most relevant passage appears in *Amb 10.31*:

For such is nature, punishing those who undertake to violate it to the degree that they actually live in unnatural opposition to it, by not allowing them to acquire naturally all of nature’s power, for they have been partially deprived of its very integrity.<sup>22</sup>

This passage highlights another key notion in Maximos’ theology, anthropology and moral psychology, that of power or faculty (δύναμις) as the content of nature, which is indispensable for understanding the relationship between nature and volition, in general, but also in the context we are dealing with.<sup>23</sup> For our author, the *exercise* of the will consists in the personal *actualisation* of the natural powers with which we are endowed, and in this sense, the corrective mechanism described as ‘divine rule and law within created beings’ can be considered a particular manifestation, in the case of acts ‘against nature’, of a more general mechanism within the very functioning of natural powers, namely, the involuntary retro-determination of these powers through their voluntary actualisation.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, on the one hand, there is the original relationship between nature and volition, whereby volition as the operative power *par excellence* is an essential component of nature and manifests itself hypostatically as the *exercise* (ἐνέργεια) of the component faculties by which nature is endowed,<sup>25</sup> on the other hand, this concrete exercise itself *configures* in a certain state (and not in others, originally possible) the powers in question, which constitutes the premise of their subsequent exercise. This configuration and re-configuration, carried out continuously through each exercise of the natural powers at the disposal of the volition, represents their training and results in the formation of a certain acquired condition. In this sense, we speak of the *training* of a power through its *exercise*, that is, of its functional

19. For instance, in *QT 26*, 44, 52, 61, 64, 65, *Amb 7*, 8, 10.

20. See Hebrews 12:6.

21. ὁρος τε καὶ νόμος κατὰ πρόνοιαν ἐνυπάρχει τοῖς οὖσι [89–90]; translation by Conostas, in Maximos the Confessor (2018:320).

22. Τοιοῦτον γὰρ καὶ ἡ φύσις, τοὺς αὐτὴν παραφθείρειν ἐπιχειροῦντας τοσοῦτον κολάζουσα, ὅσον τοῦ παρὰ φύσιν ζῆν ἐπιτηδεύουσι, τῷ μὴ ὄλην αὐτῆς φυσικῶς ἔτι κεκτῆσθαι τῆς φύσεως τὴν δύναμιν, μειωθέντας ἤδη τῆς κατ’ αὐτὴν ἀρτιότητος’, text and translation by Conostas, in Maximos the Confessor (2014:264–265).

23. See, i.a., *Amb 5*, *Amb 37*, *Opusculum 7*.

24. The involuntary aspect is that the voluntary exercise of power cannot avoid its own shaping or training.

25. Hence the insistence of Maximos, in combating monothelitism, that volition belongs to nature.

plasticity, an idea that we find in another central notion in Maximos’ moral psychology, that of the habit (ἔξις).<sup>26</sup>

In this perspective, it follows from what Maximos says in his statements on the corrective law that the voluntary exercise of the powers ‘against nature’ (i.e. against the divine intention expressed in the *logoi*) generates a defective, corrupting training of them, one that negatively, involuntarily and inevitably affects the content of nature and, as such, the possibilities of subsequent voluntary exercises. Therefore, the corruption of nature and the corruption of will are truly circular. In *QT 42*, Maximos explicitly affirms the retro-corruption of nature through the corrupt exercise of the will, but the only statement in which we can read a determination of volition by nature (here previously corrupted by volition) occurs at the end of the text, after the conclusion, when he states that the weakness of nature is paradoxically a hindrance to the manifestation of the wickedness of the will (which is actually a positive manifestation of this determination). Now, what in *QT 42* looks only as an additional idea, perhaps worth dwelling on, but which he omits to do, appears more explicitly in other places, where he speaks more fully of the consequences of the fall.

Maximos never treats in one place all these consequences he identifies – which I have done here only selectively and illustratively – from the whole of his work.<sup>27</sup> Obviously, the first is death, as mortal life (*Amb 10.28*), characterised by the decomposition of the body, by necessities (*Amb 45*), by coming into the world through sexuality and birth (γέννησις, as opposed to creation, γένεσις, *Amb 42*), an animal-like life,<sup>28</sup> followed by demise. Along with these somatic characteristics – which we inherit along with nature, representing the phylogenetic component of the fallen human condition – come two major classes of behavioural implications, which represent the ontogenetic component of this condition, namely, the struggle for survival (*QT Intro*, *QT 6*) and the passions, the latter through the combined action of three psychological and spiritual factors: ignorance of the Creator, affective dysregulation (the famous pleasure-pain circular dialectic) (*QT Intro*, 21, 61) and, not the least, the demonic action (*QT 26*).

An important passage from *Amb 4*, conceptually akin to *QT 42*, where Maximos describes how Christ manifests his ‘form of a slave’ (Phlp 2:7), that is, the human nature as he has appropriated it, and the corresponding ‘obedience’ (ὕπακοή), that is, the manner of exercising his human will, states that Christ assumed the first two aspects of the fallen condition – mortal life and natural necessities (implicitly the effort required to satisfy them), described by the concept of passibility (τὸ παθητὸν) or ‘blameless passions’ (μετὰ τῶν ἀδιαβλήτων παθῶν) – but not the third one, which consists in obedience as enslavement to the devil and to sin, which are the moral passions, and which he describes as:

26. The author has dealt more with this in Moldovan (2020).

27. Larchet (1998:30) considers Maximos a champion of the display of these consequences (see also Kocharczyk-Bonińska 2013).

28. Cf. Psalms 48:12, 21 (LXX).

[T]he law of sin which arose from disobedience, whose power over us lies in the unnatural disposition of our will, establishing [...] an impassioned state within the passible condition of our nature.<sup>29</sup>

Further on he remarks: ‘the habit of a sinful will [...] transform[s] the weakness of our nature into material for evil’. And in the next *Ambiguum*, 5, he states that Christ:

[M]ade His way through the passible element of our nature, authoritatively showing that what in His own will is moved naturally by His power, is in our case that which moves our will.<sup>30</sup>

All these passages suggest that in our case, as descendants of Adam, there is a subtle, and virtually inevitable, quantum leap from the corruption specific to fallen nature to the corruption of the exercise of the will. Elsewhere he calls this ‘the law of sin’ or ‘the law of the flesh’,<sup>31</sup> which strongly suggests its involuntary character, but which he nonetheless explains by a determination resulting from a pathological exercise of our will. For example, in a long and detailed passage in *QT Intro*:

[A]ll who share in human nature possess [...] a vital and active affection for the visible part of that nature, by which I mean the body. This affection forces man, as if he were a slave, to contrive all kinds of passions in his desire for pleasure and fear of pain. [...] Insofar as the entire nature of physical bodies is corruptible and subject to dissolution, whatever a person does to keep it in a condition of stability, he succeeds only in hastening the body’s corruptibility, for out of fear [...], contrary to all sense and his own free will, he pursues what he does not desire through what he desires, having become dependent on things that by nature can never be stable. He is consequently subject to change together with those things that break up and scatter the disposition of his soul, [...] while he himself fails to perceive his own destruction, for the simple reason that his soul is completely blind to the truth.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, it is precisely the experience of the corruption specific to fallen nature and the various sufferings that this corruption causes us that impose a massive and severe, corrupting constraint on the exercise of our will; by ignoring our Creator and true Giver of goods, we irrationally attach ourselves only

29. τόν ἐκ τῆς παρακοῆς νόμον τῆς ἀμαρτίας, οὗ κράτος ἐστίν ἡ παρά φύσιν τῆς ἡμετέρας γνώμης διάθεσις, ἐμπαλιν ἢ ἐφ’ ἡμῶν ἔχει, τὸ καθ’ ἡμῶν φύσει παθητὸν διεξήλθεν, ἐξουσία γνώμης κινητῶν δεῖξας ἐφ’ ἑαυτοῦ τὸ πεφυκὸς ἐφ’ ἡμῶν εἶναι γνώμης κινητικόν; text and translation by Conostas in *Maximos the Confessor* (2014:24–25, 30–31).

30. ἀμέλει ἐξουσία γνώμης ἔργα πεποικῶς τὰ πάθη τῆς φύσεως, ἀλλ’ οὐχ ὡς ἡμεῖς ἀνάγκης ἀποτελέσματα φυσικῆς, ἐμπαλιν ἢ ἐφ’ ἡμῶν ἔχει, τὸ καθ’ ἡμῶν φύσει παθητὸν διεξήλθεν, ἐξουσία γνώμης κινητῶν δεῖξας ἐφ’ ἑαυτοῦ τὸ πεφυκὸς ἐφ’ ἡμῶν εἶναι γνώμης κινητικόν; text and translation by Conostas in *Maximos the Confessor* (2014:46–47).

31. See *QT* 21, 62; sometimes ‘the body of sin’ (*QT* 54) or ‘the curse of sin’ (*QT* 52), as opposed to the corruption of nature as such, which he calls ‘the law of nature’.

32. ἕκαστος τῶν τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης μετεληφθῶτων φύσεως ... ἐν ἑαυτῷ ζῶσαν ἔχει καὶ πράττουσαν τὴν περὶ τὸ φαινόμενον αὐτοῦ μέρος, λέγω δὲ τὸ σῶμα, φίλιαν, ἀναγκάζουσαν αὐτὸν δουλοπρεπῶς διὰ τε τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν τῆς ἡδονῆς καὶ τὸν φόβον τῆς ὀδύνης πολλὰς ἰδέας ἐπινοῆσαι παθῶν, ... Φθαρτῆς γὰρ οὐσης τῆς ὅλης φύσεως τῶν σωματίων καὶ σκεδαστῆς, δι’ ὅσων τις ἐπιτηδεύει τρόπων ταύτην συστήσασθαι, τὴν αὐτῆς φθορὰν ἰσχυροτέραν μᾶλλον καθίστησιν, δεδουκῶς καὶ μὴ θέλων αἰεὶ τὸ στεργόμενον καὶ παρά γνώμην περιεπῶν ἀνεπαισθήτως διὰ τοῦ στεργόμενου τὸ μὴ στεργόμενον, ἐξηρημένους τῶν φύσει στήναι μὴ δυναμένων καὶ διὰ τοῦτο συνεξαλλοῦν τοῖς σκεδαστοῖς τῆς ψυχῆς τὴν διάθεσιν συνδιανοημένην ἀστάτως τοῖς βέουσι καὶ τὴν οἰκείαν ἀπώλειαν οὐ κατανοῶν διὰ τὴν παντελεῖ τῆς ψυχῆς πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν τύφλωσιν’ [361–368]; transl. Conostas (*Maximos the Confessor*, 2018, 88–89), slightly modified. See also *Amb* 8; *Capita theologica* 2.95; *Epistula* 1.

to his gifts – primarily our own bodies as the material support of the fallen life – in an attempt, all the more stubborn because it is futile, to ensure our survival (‘fear of pain’) and acquire fulfilment (‘desire for pleasure’). The only liberation from this fatal circuit expressing the coupling of the two corruptions, Maximos believes, is achieved only by Christ, who lives the same experience of nature’s corruption as we do, but uncorruptedly exercises his will, unabashed from the relationship with the Father, and only in and through him can we share in a similar restorative experience. Maximos describes at length this restoration by Christ and appropriation of it by those who follow him throughout his work, but this is no longer the object of interest of this article here.

## Conclusion

Returning to *QT* 42, the above analysis highlights in this Response the general dialectical structure of soteriology according to St. Maximos the Confessor, centred on the Adam-Christ pair and antinomy. Quite remarkable is that this structure implies the universal relevance of this soteriology; the specific, ‘diagonal’ mode of Christ’s realisation of salvation has full value insofar as it co-opts us, the descendants of Adam. However, *QT* 42 only evokes, not presents this relevance directly, which is, in the author’s opinion, a feature of Maximian writing that here, as in many other places, uses a metonymic style. This text, for instance, does not present the genetic mechanism of the fall, but assumes it; on the other hand, in passages where this mechanism is detailed, the structure revealed here is often partially present (e.g. *QT* Intro, *QT* 61) or even absent (e.g. *QT* 21), but it can legitimately be assumed.

Secondly, the finer composition of this general structure is remarkable, given by the circular, mutually conditioning relationship between nature and volition. Although surely invoked here in part, by highlighting only the conditioning of nature by volition and by a very discreet final suggestion of reverse conditioning, this relationship makes the central subject of anthropology and moral psychology which Maximos engages through his writings, irenic and polemical, when he details various aspects and implications of this soteriology. It should also be noted that, when referring to Adam or his descendants, the mutual relationship is usually described in its lapsarian, mutually corrupting context, whereas the positive relationship of mutual beneficial conditioning is invoked in the case of Christ, the saints, or those who practise ascetic devotions. This is an expected contextualisation, but only a careful study of both contexts would allow us to identify all the pertinent details of this truly essential relationship.

Finally, the present investigation is also important for understanding the concept of passion in Maximos. In addition to the ontological passibility of human existence, the circular relationship between nature and volition, which in fact is human self-determination, represents the second major susceptibility for the induction and manifestation of the passions. In the context of the fall, when the corruption of nature is transmitted and inherited, the exercise of personal

will is so severely conditioned by its own struggle to overcome inner and outer corruption that it cannot practically avoid its own moral corruption. The passibility or involuntary weakness of nature, granted by divinity precisely to limit or even expel the future possibilities of the voluntary corruption, turns out to be no less than the very matrix of the pathological exercise and training of our will in the form of the passions. This is a serious warning from St. Maximus, even for us today.

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