

SYSTEMATIC REFLECTIONS 3

The Christological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor

Ambigua 11-40 to John

AMBIGUUM 11

From Gregory's oration on St. Athanasius:

"The rest are but little things, and have been granted as a dispensation for the sake of little men."

- Material things are always little in comparison with eternal things.
- Material knowledge is given to those weak in intellect in order to draw them higher; thus Job's restoration to material wealth shows God's mercy to these weak ones.

AMBIGUUM 12

From Gregory's oration on St. Athanasius:

"He (i.e., St. Athanasius) cleanses the temple of the God-hucksters and Christ-peddlers, not however with a whip of woven cords, but with persuasive words."

- This does not mean that Jesus is more severe than Athanasius but that he uses words because he is in the same condition as those who he rebukes.

AMBIGUUM 13

From Gregory's oration against the Eunomians:

"There are, you can be sure, people who not only have itching ears but also itching tongues."

- The tendency is to focus on what is new and superficial. To rise from sin, it is necessary to fix on what is unchanging and constant.
- We should sing and write about what is true and labor against sinful tendencies: "By cutting away the imperfections of the soul, the former aims to bring those who have the truth into greater intimacy with God through knowledge..."
- Asceticism teaches us fixity in desire; contemplation teaches us fixity in thought.
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AMBIGUUM 14

From Gregory's oration against the Eunomians:

"Just as a flower in winter is completely out of season, a man's clothing is out of place on a woman, a woman's on a man, and geometry during mourning."

- Order is the key to goodness.
- It is important especially when referring words to God. This is true in the ascent of contemplation as well as when leading others to the truth.

AMBIGUUM 15

From Gregory's Great Theological Oration:

"That there exist God and a creative and sustaining cause of all things is taught to us both by sight and natural law—by sight, since it observes that visible things are firmly fixed and proceed along their courses, being immovably moved and carried, if I may put it like this; and by natural law, whereby one infers the author of these things by means of their orderliness."

- Knowledge can rise to an image of God when it knows things together in unity, in the simplicity of the intellect. This is not knowledge of his essence, though.
- The person becomes in their grasp of things a sort of boundary between creation and God, rising to the level at which creation manifests God.
- All of philosophy, when properly ordered, leads the mind to the heights of creation.
- God creates the limit of created beings; rest defines their completion. All creatures are therefore in motion until their completion in their cause.
- To reach God is to go beyond creatures, thus to go beyond thought: "Thus when all the thoughts of all sensible and intelligible thinking beings reach the end of the process of thought, they cease, as do all the thing being thought about, along with the whole of natural intellectual motion and its relation to all relative objects of thought, for the soul has nothing left to think about, having thought through everything that is naturally thinkable, after which, in a manner beyond intellect and reason and knowledge, without thought, without knowing, and without words, it simply casts itself forward to be united with God, without thinking in any way whatsoever, or, was reasoning about God."
- God is known not by intellection but by union.

AMBIGUUM 16

From Gregory's Great Theological Oration:

"But if we say that God is 'incorporeal,' this term neither represents nor contains the divine essence. The same is true of 'unbegotten,' 'beginninglessness,' 'immutable,' and 'incorruptible,' indeed of whatever is said concerning God or of the things around God."

- Negative assertions about God apply to his transcendence, not his essence; thus, unbegotten in this sense is a quality of God, not a property of the Father or the Son.

AMBIGUUM 17

From Gregory's Great Theological Oration:

"Predicating a 'body' or 'is begotten' of something or other is not enough to set forth and signify the entity to which these predicates refer, but it is necessary to mention the subject of these predicates, if one aims to set forth completely and sufficiently an object of knowledge; for whether it is a man, or an ox, or a horse, it will be 'embodied' and 'corruptible.'"

- God is not properly known by any created image.
- There is no concept that is adequate to God.
- The truth of any created being is not in its characteristics, but in its essence.
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AMBIGUUM 18

From Gregory's Great Theological Oration:

"If what does not exist is nowhere, then perhaps what is nowhere does not exist; but if it (i.e., the Divine) is somewhere, as it surely must be, since it exists, then either it is in the universe, or beyond the universe."

AMBIGUUM 19

From Gregory's Great Theological Oration:

"Whether this was an appearance during the day occurring in the imagination, or a truthful vision in the night, or an impression made on the governing power (i.e., the intellect) drawing near to future realities, as though they were present."

AMBIGUUM 20

From Gregory's Great Theological Oration:

"Had Paul been able to express the experiences gained from the third heaven, and his progress, or ascent, or assumption."

AMBIGUUM 21

"John, the forerunner of the Word and great voice of the Truth, affirmed that the lower world itself would not be able to contain them."

AMBIGUUM 22

From Gregory's Great Theological Oration:

"But as for discourse about God, the more perfect it is, the harder it becomes to approach, since it has more perceptions and more arduous solutions."

- The difference of creatures derives from their logoi, and thus their divinely-intended essence.
- The mind first comprehends difference, but if it contemplates the difference, it can come to a grasp of the logoi and thus of the Logos that is the unity of all logoi.
- God cannot be known through these logoi as he is in himself.
- "So let there be an end to pointless and harmful curiosity on the part of all those who think they can understand the Deity by means of the vacuous constructions of the mind, with which they are incapable of understanding even the lowermost creature in terms of the logos of its being and existence."

AMBIGUUM 23

The quotation is the same as treated in Amb 1, from Gregory's first oration on the Son:

"For this reason the Monad from the beginning moved toward a dyad and at the Trinity came to a halt."

This response concerns the relationship between causality and motion.

- Since motion derives from a cause, all things that are in motion are created.
- God creates, sends forth, and draws each creature to its end and limit.
- Divinity is uncaused, therefore unmoved.
- Motion can be ascribed to divinity in the sense that it brings about motion and is thus moved in creatures.
- Thus the attributes of beings can be applied to God.
- "The Divine is moved to the extent that it creates an inner condition of desire and love among beings capable of receiving them, and it moves insofar as it naturally attracts the yearning of those who are being moved to it."
- The mind first learns unity then fecundity and then is drawn to consider the hypostatic union of Father and Word and then Holy Spirit.

AMBIGUUM 24

From Gregory's first oration on the Son:

"Now, unless we are intoxicated, we make a distinction, I think, between 'willing' and 'a will,' between 'begetting' and 'a birth,' and 'speaking' and 'speech.' The former refer to a subject in motion, the latter designate the motion itself. What is willed does not belong to a will—it is not a necessary concomitant of it. Nor does what is born belong to a begetting, nor what is heard to an act of speech. They belong instead to the subject who wills, who begets, who

speaks. What belongs to God, however, transcends all these cases, since for Him begetting may well just e the will to beget.”

- There can be no will apart from the agent. Thus, if the Son derives from the will of the Father, he derives from the Father.
- The Father and Son have one will.

AMBIGUUM 25

From Gregory’s first oration on the Son:

“For what hinders me, if I assume the same minor premise, namely, ‘the Father is greater by nature,’ and then add that ‘by nature He is not absolutely greater, nor Father,’ and then conclude that ‘the greater is not absolutely greater,’ or that ‘being the Father’ does not ‘absolutely’ entail ‘being the Father?’”

The Father causes the Son, and so is in that sense greater than the Son, but the Son is equal to the Father in regard to nature. Predicates cannot be applied equally.

Predication does not refer necessarily to the underlying nature. This is also true of the predicate “divine” when applied to the saints.

AMBIGUUM 26

From Gregory’s first oration on the Son:

“Suppose, then, if you like, that ‘Father’ is the name of an activity; you will not ensnare us this way either. He will actively have produced that very consubstantiality (i.e., of the Son), even if the notion of activity employed here is decidedly absurd.”

- By locating personhood in essence or activity, the Eunomians were not able to conceive of the proper understanding of Father and Son. Since Father and Son name, rather, the relationship between the two persons, they do not name either essence or activity. Maximus’s rearticulating of this here is directly relevant to human personhood. If persons are defined by relation, then the true personhood of saint is defined by the quality of their relationship to the Son.
- The identity of the Father and Son are constituted by their relation: “The name of the Father is neither the name of the essence nor a name of the energy but rather a name of a relationship (*schesis*) and it says how the Father is towards the Son and how the Son is towards the Father” (26, quoted in S diss 28, n 60).

AMBIGUUM 27

From Gregory’s second oration on the Son:

“On the other hand, God would not be called ‘God’ of the Word (for how could He be the God of the one who, properly speaking, is God?), but God of the one who was visible, in the same way as God is ‘Father,’ not of the one who was visible, but of the Word, because He (i.e., Christ, the Incarnate Word) was twofold, with the result that the former are properly attributed to both, but the latter not properly so, which is the opposite of what happens in our case, since, properly speaking, God is our ‘God’ but not our ‘Father.’”

- The Father is both Father and God of Christ, in regard to his two natures. Yet, he is not properly called the God of Christ, because Christ in his person is the Son.
- We are properly creatures of God and children of the Father only in a derived fashion.

AMBIGUUM 28

From Gregory’s second oration on the Son:

“He (that is Christ) receives life, judgment, the inheritance of the Gentiles, authority over all flesh, glory, disciples, or whatever else is mentioned. (To which the teacher adds) And these

things belong to His humanity (after which he says), yet it would not be granting to Him acquired properties, but properties that have existed together with Him from the beginning, not by grace, but by reason of His nature.”

The granting to God being spoken of is properly speaking the ascent of the mind to communion with God when comparing God with creatures. This is a lower form of knowing than the knowledge of God given by revelation.

AMBIGUUM 29

From Gregory’s second oration on the Son:

“For we affirm that it is impossible for God to be evil or not to be.”

While a quick reading of the statement might suggest that Gregory is saying that it is impossible for God not to be evil, he is saying rather that it is impossible for God not to exist. This is another step in the ascent of the mind to God.

AMBIGUUM 30

From Gregory’s second oration on the Son:

“There you have the Son’s titles. Walk in a godly manner through all those that are sublime, and compassionately through all that are corporeal; or rather, treat them all in a godly manner, so that you might become God by ascending from below, for the sake of Him who descended for us from above.”

The ascent to God is by way of the divine names, allowing one’s intellect to be freed from the hold of the flesh. The quotation points to the link between knowing and being purified that is particularly essential in coming to knowledge of God. In this way, the person can be said to be “immaterial and formless”. The person becomes Christ like, ready to suffer on behalf of others.

AMBIGUUM 31

From Gregory’s oration On the Nativity:

“The laws of nature are abolished; the world above must be filled. Christ commands this, let us not resist.”

- The laws that are abolished are those that keep humanity from divinity and prevent the incarnation. His birth is thus miraculous. This at the same time renews the laws of nature that were distorted by sin. These “laws of irrationality” are undone. The world of heaven is thus able to be filled.
- Humanity, when freed of the limits of sin, “is able to receive, within the limits of what is possible for him, the whole of the divine beauty.”
- Another explanation is that in Jesus, the Son operates within the laws of nature while remaining completely beyond them. Through this, he divinizes us without changing our nature.
- We will be with him in his divinity, just as this divinity remains above while his humanity is operating below. This is also how our divinization occurs.
- Maximus is showing here that we, like Jesus, can exist simultaneously in the flesh and with the Father.

AMBIGUUM 32

From Gregory’s oration On the Nativity:

“For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given, whose government is upon His shoulder, for He is exalted by means of the cross.”

- The government of Christ is through the cross. The cross is the principle of government.
- The shape suggests comprehensiveness of all things.

- Its composition suggests wisdom, knowledge, and virtue, the first from the vertical, the other two from the horizontal.
- The properties of the vertical show the constancy of God, the properties of the horizontal show creation's dependence on God.
- Its activity shows the necessity of mortification for union with God.
- It is also the symbol of our transformation.

AMBIGUUM 33

From Gregory's oration On the Nativity:

"The Logos becomes thick."

- This means his taking flesh in order to show himself to creatures.
- It could also mean his manifestation and concealment in the logos of beings.
- It could mean his manifestation in the Scripture in order to raise us up gradually, "bringing us for His own sake into union with Himself by contraction to the same extent that He has for our sake expanded Himself according to the principle of condescension."

AMBIGUUM 34

From Gregory's oration On the Nativity:

"Not from those things that He is in Himself [can we know God], but from those things that are around Him, selecting one impression from out of another, and combining them into some sort of image of the truth."

- God is never known in his essence.
- The fact of God's existence only is known from that which is "around" the essence of God, if contemplated properly. These things reveal only properties of God that are accessible to reason, things that God is not that pertain to creatures.
- All things that can be said of God through reason are properly said of creation and only in negation applied to God.

AMBIGUUM 35

From Gregory's oration On the Nativity:

"But since this did not suffice to Goodness—to move solely within self-contemplation—it was necessary that the Good should overflow and make progress, so that a greater number of beings would benefit."

- The oneness of God is singular and simple; it is the source of all creatures.
- As Dionysius wrote, "'He exists without diminution in each of the created things in a manner proportionate to each, without being contained by them in any way, being present in some by the excess of His munificent effusion, in others by a more measured impartation, and in others so that they are able to reflect only a glimmer of His goodness.'"

AMBIGUUM 36

From Gregory's oration On the Nativity:

"He communicates a second communion, far more marvelous than the first."

- Recreation after sin is more marvelous than the original creation since it entails union in a hypostasis.
- Nature thus "receives its subsistence in a divine manner."

AMBIGUUM 37

From Gregory's oration On the Nativity:

"Now then receive together with me the conception (i.e., of Christ) and leap before Him for joy, if not like John in the womb, then at least like David at the repose of the ark."

- John is the image of the preparation for holiness; David is the image of contemplation.
- While John is the perfection of the preparation for God, David is an image of a lesser grasp.
- John symbolizes fixity in holiness; David the repentance after falling
- "That man is able, in this present age, in a manner that is lofty and beyond nature, to reach the most extreme measure of virtue and knowledge and wisdom, and attain the science of divine realities, is something that occurs through the types and images of the archetypes."
- All of the truths we know are shadows and types of the true Word.
- "The Word in whom the universe is gathered transcends the truth, and also, insofar as He is man and God, He truly transcends all humanity and divinity."

AMBIGUUM 38

From Gregory's oration On the Nativity:

"If He flees into Egypt, eagerly flee together with Him, for it is good to flee together with the persecuted Christ. Should He linger in Egypt, call Him out of Egypt, for there He is rightly worshiped."

- "So 'it is good to flee together with Christ into Egypt,' that is, together with the divine discerning reason that dwells within us (which is now persecuted on account of His infancy because of our infancy, for we are infants compared to Him), pursued by the earthly mind that still reigns and rules over us from the impassioned movements of the flesh, leading us to the 'afflictions' of the practical life, until such time as the advent of dispassion informs us of the death of those who sought the life of the most divine reason, which lives like a child within us."
- Christ comes into our Egypt and cleanses it.
- When we flee with him into Egypt, we take up our afflictions voluntarily and they become a help for us.
- The ascent from the flesh to virtue is the ascent from Egypt to Judea.

AMBIGUUM 39

From Gregory's oration On the Theophany:

"So if they were absolutely bound to be impious, and to fall away from the glory of God, being led astray to idols and fabrications of art and things fashioned by hands, men of sense could not imprecate anything worse upon them than that they might worship and honor such things."

- The sense of the passage is that the Greeks might find the futility of their worship by taking their worship even more seriously.

AMBIGUUM 40

From Gregory's oration On the Theophany:

"Where there is purification, there is also illumination, and illumination is the fulfillment of longing among those who desire the greatest, or the greatest, or something beyond what is great."

- Purification and illumination go hand in hand since the penetration by God is prevented only by the darkness of our sinfulness.
- The Trinity is the greatest; the unity is the greatest; both of these exist beyond all the good of creation.

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