

Paper for the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Thursday 27 March

## **St Maximus the Confessor's Epistolary Metaphysics**

### **Abstract**

After providing some context on Maximus's life, times, and broader theological context, this paper will reconstruct Maximus's metaphysical system with reference to his epistolary greetings, specifically the use of *logoi* in his greetings and farewells. Despite the manifold meanings of *logos*, Maximus's greetings repeat *logoi* (in the plural) as a means of mediating the presence of the letter writer, in a way that hints beyond merely the *words* of the letter. Letter 5 shows a clear instantiation of this as the words of the letter and the *logoi* of Maximian metaphysics occur together ('words according to the words'), which suggests that Maximus can use *logoi* metaphysically in his letters, as well as making use of the ambiguity of the word. In short, examining antecedents for Maximus's metaphysical account of *logoi* in Irenaeus and the Neo-Chalcedonians, I will argue the *logoi* in several Maximus's letters (*Ep.* 4, 5, 7, 15, 20, 24, 28, 30, 37, 43, 45) provide the means of *continuing the Incarnation* for the believer by conveying the presence of the holy man. Thus, *logoi* are not the *hypostasis* of Christ (*pace* Jordan Daniel Wood), nor the Divine Ideas in a Platonic sense (*pace* Sherwood), but principles of individuation that can be conveyed across time and space that in deriving from the *Logos's* wills (*thelemata*) continue the incarnation whilst truly conveying the presence of the letter writer.

## **Relational Metaphysics in the *Logoi* of Maximus the Confessor's Letters (626-640)**

### **1. Demetrius of Phaleron, *On Style*, 227, Trans. Fyfe and Roberts**

*Πλεῖστον δὲ ἐχέτω τὸ ἠθικὸν ἢ ἐπιστολή, ὥσπερ καὶ ὁ διάλογος· σχεδὸν γὰρ εἰκόνα ἕκαστος τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ψυχῆς γράφει τὴν ἐπιστολήν. καὶ ἔστι μὲν καὶ ἐξ ἄλλου λόγου παντὸς ἰδεῖν τὸ ἦθος τοῦ γράφοντος, ἐξ οὐδενὸς δὲ οὕτως, ὡς ἐπιστολῆς.*

Like the dialogue, the letter should be strong in characterisation. Everyone writes a letter in the virtual image of his own soul. In every other form of speech it is possible to see the writer's character, but in none so clearly as in the letter.

### **2. St Basil of Caesarea, *Epis.* 9 (To Maximus the Philosopher), Trans. McGuire**

*Εἰκόνας ὄντως τῶν ψυχῶν εἰσὶν οἱ λόγοι. κατεμάθομεν οὖν σε διὰ τοῦ γράμματος, ὅσον φασίν, ἐξ ὀνύχων τὸν λέοντα· καὶ ἤσθημεν εὐρόντες περὶ τὰ πρῶτα καὶ μέγιστα τῶν ἀγαθῶν οὐκ ἀργῶς διακείμενον, τὴν τε πρὸς τὸν Θεὸν ἀγάπην καὶ πρὸς τὸν πλησίον. σημεῖον δὲ ποιούμεθα τοῦ μὲν, τὴν περὶ ἡμᾶς δεξιότητά σου, τοῦ δέ, τὴν περὶ τὴν γνώσιν σπουδῆν. ὅτι δὲ ἐν δυοῖν τούτοις ἐστὶ τὰ ὅλα, γνῶριμον παντὶ Χριστοῦ μαθητῇ.*

In truth words are the images of the mind. So we have learned to know you from your letters, as truly as, according to the proverb, from the claw the lion. And we are delighted to find you not slothful in your attitude towards the first and greatest of the virtues—love towards both God and neighbour. We hold as an indication of the latter your tenderness for me; as a proof of the former, your enthusiasm for knowledge. That everything is contained in these two is known to every disciple of Christ.

### **3. Ovid *Tristitia*, 5.13.27-30, Trans. Wheeler**

*utque solebamus consumere longa loquendo / tempora. sermoni deficiente die, / sic ferat ac referat tacitas nunc littera voces, / et peragant linguae charta manusque vices.*

As we were wont to pass long hours in converse, till daylight failed our talk, so now should our letters bring and return our voiceless words, and the paper and our hands should perform the office of our tongues.

### **4. St Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epis.* 51 (To Nicobulus), Trans. Storin**

*1. Τῶν γραφόντων ἐπιστολάς (ἐπειδὴ καὶ τοῦτο αἰτεῖς), οἱ μὲν μακρότερα γράφουσιν ἢ περ εἰκός, οἱ δὲ καὶ λίαν ἐνδεέστερα· καὶ ἀμφοτέροι τοῦ μετρίου διαμαρτάνουσιν, ὥσπερ τῶν σκοπῶν οἱ τοξεύοντες, ἂν τε εἴσω πέμπωσιν, ἂν τε ὑπερπέμπωσι· τὸ γὰρ ἀποτυγχάνειν ἴσον, κἂν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐναντίων γίνηται. 2. Ἔστι δὲ μέτρον τῶν ἐπιστολῶν, ἢ χρεία· καὶ οὕτε μακρότερα γραπτέον, οὐ μὴ πολλὰ τὰ πράγματα, οὕτε μικρολογητέον, ἐνθα πολλά. [...] 4. Περὶ μὲν δὴ τῆς συντομίας ταῦτα γινώσκω· περὶ δὲ σαφηνείας ἐκεῖνο γνῶριμον, ὅτι χρὴ φεύγοντα τὸ λογοειδές, ὅσον ἐνδέχεται, μᾶλλον εἰς τὸ λαλικὸν ἀποκλίνειν· καί, ἴν' εἴπω συντόμως, αὕτη τῶν ἐπιστολῶν ἀρίστη καὶ κάλλιστα ἔχουσα, ἢ ἂν καὶ τὸν ἰδιώτην πείθῃ καὶ τὸν πεπαιδευμένον, τὸν μὲν, ὡς κατὰ τοὺς πολλοὺς οὕσα, τὸν δέ, ὡς ὑπὲρ τοὺς πολλοὺς, καὶ ἢ αὐτόθεν γνῶριμος.*

1. Of those who write epistles (since you request this too), some write ones longer than they should be, while others write ones that are too inadequate; both miss the right measure just as some people, when shooting at targets, come up too short and others overshoot. The failure is equal, even though it came about in opposite ways. 2. Necessity is the appropriate measure of epistles. One ought to write neither too much when there are not many subjects nor too little when there are many. [...] 4. Indeed, that's what I know about concision. As to clarity, here's the notable point: one ought to avoid highly stylized language as much as possible, and instead incline toward the conversational. And, to speak concisely, the very best epistle and the one that has the best qualities is the one that persuades both the commoner and the educated—the former being as though down among the masses, the latter as though above the masses—and is recognizable at once.

**5. Origen: *De Principiis*, 1.8.3, Trans. John Behr**

For, in our view, not even the devil himself was incapable of good; but although able to allow the good in, he does not, however, also desire it or make any effort towards virtue. For as we are taught by those quotations we cited from the prophets, he was at one time good, when he dwelt in the paradise of God, among the cherubim. Just as he had in himself the capacity of allowing in either virtue or evil, and falling away from virtue he turned with his whole mind towards evil, so also other creatures, having the capacity for either, by avoiding evil by their will, they cleave to the good.

**6. Origen: *De Principiis*, 1.6.2, Trans. John Behr**

“For the end is always like the beginning, and, therefore, as there is one end of all things, so ought there to be understood one beginning of all things, and as there is one end of many things, so also from one beginning there are many differences and varieties, which, in turn, through the goodness of God and by subjection to Christ and through the unity of the Holy Spirit, are recalled to one end which is like the beginning: [...]

But, if they are negligent and careless about such participation, then each one, by fault of his own slothfulness (*desidia*) becomes - one more quickly, another more slowly, one to a greater extent, another to a lesser – the cause of his own lapse or fall. And since, as we have said, this fall or lapse by which each one departs from his original state, has in itself the greatest diversity, according to the impulse of the intellect of intention (*pro mentis ac propositi motibus*), one falls slightly, another more seriously, to the lower things: in this is the just judgement of the providence of God (*iustum iudicium de providentiae*), that it should happen to everyone according to the diversity of his conduct, in proportion to the merit of his declension and revolt.”

**7. Justinian: *Epistula ad Menam*, Trans. John Behr**

For those who do not pay vigilant attention to themselves, changes of condition take place, from their own fault, either quicker or slower, greater or lesser, so that from this fault, by a divine judgement corresponding to the better or worse movements of each according to merit, one will have an angelic rank in the future arrangement, or ruling power, or authority over certain beings, or a throne over subjects, or lordship over slaves; while those not completely falling away will have the oversight and aid of those mentioned. Thus for the most part it is from those set under the rulers and the authorities and thrones and dominions, and perhaps sometimes even from these, that the race of human beings will be constituted in the world in unity.

**8. St Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua ad Johannem*, 70**

From Saint Gregory’s Funeral Oration for Saint Basil:

In no thing, therefore, from all things, is it possible to fail to find in one such from all.

Whatever good thing a person approves of, it is in respect of that same thing that he assuredly also makes progress, that is, increase, by which one makes progress; and he obviously delights in, and is encouraged by good things said about it. He is delighted, for he increases it in his soul, as a strongly desired object; and he is encouraged to progress still further, for hearing it praised gives him greater incitement. [...] Saint Basil was also relevant to him, as a teacher and deliverer of the sermon (*τοῦ λόγου*); and it was desirable (*πεποθημένης*) to those who love virtue, that is, to those who praise it, since they desire to know (*ποθοῦσι γινῶναι*) the modes (*τοὺς τρόπους*) of progress in virtue through imitation; and it was no less a fitting subject for orations (*τοῖς λόγοις*), themselves, since they manifest the beautiful things of virtue. Thus, every man, whose life is praiseworthy in the sight of God, and especially the life of the Great basil, whether orators are able to encompass the whole of his virtue, and set it forth as an image (*εἰκόνα*), living and inspiring to those who are enamored of it, or whether the magnitude of his virtue is beyond their grasp, ‘it will not be possible to fail to find in one from all (that is, from the oration, the orator, and the listener) something by which one might not suitably acquire something good, just as it has been earlier investigated with greater precision.

## 9. St Maximus the Confessor, *Epis. 8 (To Jordanes)*

The desire according to the flesh (*Ὁ κατὰ σάρκα πόθος*) by nature withers away with time (*χρόνω μαραίνεσθαι πέφυκε*), going away along with those from whom they are separated in terms of [physical] location (*τοπικῶς*), that is those that have unity with each other in terms of this [fleshly desire]. For such desire has its constitution (*τὴν σύστασιν*) around sense perception (*τὴν αἴσθησιν*), which does not at all have the power to grasp (*ἀντιλαμβάνεσθαι*) those that are present.

But the desire according to the spirit (*Ὁ δὲ κατὰ πνεῦμα πόθος*) spiritually (*νοερῶς*) holds together as always present those that have been joined together according to this spiritual desire, even if they are separated from one another in terms of the flesh: this desire has not received the circumscription (*περιγραφὴν*) according to time or place. For such desire has existence (*τὴν ὕπαρξιν*) around the *nous* (*τὸν νοῦν*), which is never divided or confined with those that are separated in their bodies in terms of [physical] location (*τοπικῶς*).

Having been deemed worthy to have this desire (*πόθον*) from the beginning towards you, most holy ones, I seem to see you always present, and to perceive us speaking together (*ἀεὶ παρόντας ὄρᾶν δοκῶ, καὶ διαλεγόμενων αἰσθάνεσθαι*) – and neither time nor place (*καιρὸς ἢ τόπος*) are able to remove me from the memory (*μνήμης*) of you, which [memory] indicates that through everything, you are present spiritually (*ὑμᾶς παρόντας πνευματικῶς*) and that you expel all the foul things in me that are unable to bear the great fragrance of the divine grace in you. For I am convinced that the memory does not merely make you, most holy ones, appear in the imagination (*φαντάζεσθαι*), but it also makes you appear in the senses as truly present (*ἀλλὰ παρόντων ἀληθῶς ἐπαισθάνεσθαι*), and thus I produce the accurate fullness of your presence come to pass (*τὸ γινόμενον πληροφορίαν ἀκριβῆ τῆς ὑμῶν παρουσίας ποιοῦμενος*). For the active power (*δραστήριος δύναμις*) in you according to God's grace, together with your memory, has chased away the exceedingly annoying demons, it has bestowed the safe manifestation of your presence.

And it is by no means amazing if the God of signs and wonders (*ὁ τῶν σημείων καὶ τῶν τεράτων Θεός*) makes present spiritually (*νοερῶς*) those that are absent bodily (*τοὺς ἀπόντας σωματικῶς*), as He Himself sees, and if they are effected (*ἐνεργούμενοι*) by Him in such things as befits God, and they are more present to one another than if their bodies were physically close in terms of location. And if, only by being remembered, honourable fathers, you bestow such honour to my unworthy thoughts, by invisibly visiting [me] in the Spirit (*ἀοράτως φοιτῶντες τῷ πνεύματι*), how much more [would you] by being present in the eyes (*κατ' ὀφθαλμοὺς παρόντες*), by sanctifying my hearing by the holy words through [your] living voice (*διὰ ζώσης φωνῆς τοῖς θείοις καθαγιαζόντες λόγοις*), and by lucidly teaching virtue by your own habits?

Hence, being sad and grieving, I travel, desiring Thee and seeking Thee, the Good Shepherd and Teacher, Who knows me, the lost sheep to dwell in the place of vegetation (I speak of the habit of practicing virtue, which drives away fever of suffering, through the practice of virtue.) You, who know where I the lost sheep am, are able to feed on the water of respite, (I mean the grace of knowledge, which irrigates (*τὴν ἄρδουσάν*) the *nous* through contemplation, which turns my soul from evil into virtue) by both holy words and examples, and leads on the paths of righteousness, which according to piety, indicate the ways to salvation. And He calls wisely by a rod and a staff, that is to say, by the memory of the eternal punishment, just as by a certain rod He leads away the one being led into evil, and by the staff of the encouragement of wanting good things, He promotes the custom into virtue, through the supporting of hope.

**10. Evagrius Ponticus, *The Great Letter*, Trans. Casiday**

1. You know that when those who are separated far from each other by a great distance (which many different necessities may occasionally bring about) want to know - or to make known to one another – those intentions and hidden secrets that are not for everyone and are not to be revealed to anyone except those who have a kindred mind, they do so through letters. And though they are far apart, they are near; though distant, they see and are seen; though silent, they speak and hear; though they seem to sleep, they keep vigil in that their intended actions are fulfilled; though sick, they flourish; though resting, they are active; I might even say, ‘though dead, they live’ – for a letter is able to relate not only what is, but also has been and what shall be.

2. The mutual affection of the senses is visible in the way they all show their strength by compensating for their fellow-senses. Thus, the hand substitutes for the tongue; the eye, for the ear; the paper, for the soil of the heart that receives the intentions sown in it by the furrow of the lines. As for the rest – the many different benefits, significations, differences and strength that are found in them – now is not the time to speak concerning each and every one of them.

**11. St Maximus the Confessor, *Epis. 5 (To Constantine Sacellarius)***

If, meeting me as though I were present, my blessed master truly rejoices through my writings, as he has written, it is clear that he completely rejoices as he welcomes my words. Approval of the words is the disposition of welcoming the words according to the words. And the precise proof of this disposition is the work of the faculty as it bears the words. Therefore, my master has offered me the most faithful surety of exhortation for what I will say, which is his eagerness to do what is said. And as it is written, ‘I have not restrained my lips,’ to say the things that might be able to advantage him, myself, and others, as much as I am able to receive the grace ‘of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching’ to contemplate wisely and to speak piously the things I have contemplated.

Therefore, let us become, dearly beloved, willing practitioners of the works according to His command, and let us flee the falsehood of this age, and let us not tie down the soul in the things considered pleasing in it [this age]. The world is passing away, and all the wastes in it are fading away, being destroyed according to nature. It proves that this eagerness about divine things aiming at salvation, is not only the hatred of sin, but also the *way of life* detached from public affairs; not only the separation from wretched men, but also aversion of the soul towards all corrupting things; not only disdain for the flesh through virtue, but also the constant and steadfast temperance towards everything that deceptively flatters the soul through the senses, through which [temperance] we not only quench every unbridled desire, but also lull the wilful movements of concupiscence not permitting our reason to be carried away in slavery to these, even as the charioteer is seized by mad horses to be carried into the pit, when nobody puts in order or is able to hold in check the illogical impulse of the yoked. [...]

I have written these things and more than these already according to my strength, and writing, I do not stop, such that I am, having such a desire (*πόθος*) towards my beloved master, who is the one who enacts these words. But let us be sober and vigilant about our own protection, O blessed one, lest we be further sentenced for hearing and speaking about divine things rashly and vainly.

Since even about these words, we ‘shall give account of [ourselves] to God’ on the day of judgement – both I who am saying these things, and the ones hearing these things – whenever we leave them completely unproductive and fruitless. Rather, let it come to pass that all of us are exulted in the words of God, and are shown as doers of His divine and salvific wills in His words. All of this, by the prayers and intercessions of our altogether glorious, all holy Lady, the Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary and all the saints. Amen.

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