God's Providence and Human Personhood in the Context of
Orthodox Theology and Existential Philosophy

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I would like to draw attention to one aspect of the heritage of the Church Fathers which is not widely discussed now and which to my mind deserves special study - the Orthodox teaching of God's providence. I believe that this teaching is especially important in the context of the modern quest for personhood, and unfortunately, as far as I know, not much attention has been paid to it in the works of leading Orthodox theologians and Patristic scholars[1]. To try to establish dialogue with philosophers and secular scholars, I will interpret some aspects of Orthodox theology of personhood with the help of existential philosophy.

I. Immediacy of God's Providence

I would like to begin by drawing attention to one of the most sophisticated treatments of God's providence by the Church Fathers. This treatment is found in the theology of St Maximus the Confessor. Maximus' thought in general is very complicated, but here (following Nemesius of Emesa[2]) he says something understandable for any believer- one might go so far as to say for any human being. Speaking about God's providence in *Amb*. 10 (PG 91, 1192) Maximus says that nature itself teaches us of God's providence "over all things." This is illustrated by the fact that in complex and dangerous situations nature itself pushes us to God and forces us to find salvation through prayer. Maximus emphasizes the immediacy of this experience. He says that even before we have any idea, "being caught by a great need," we call to God. This immediacy shows that God's providence attracts us without prior reflection- that it is quicker than our thought. From this example, says Maximus, it is clear that "God's help is more powerful than anything" and inherent in our very nature.

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[1]   There are several very important observations about the role of Providence in St Maximus in P. Sherwood's renowned work -- The Earlier Ambigua of S. Maximus the Confessor and his Refutation of Origenism. Roma: Herder, 1955 (Studia Anselmiana XXXVI).

[2]   De natura hominis. XLIV. On some aspects of Nemesius's teaching on Providence, see: *Sharples R.W.* Nemesius of Emesa and some Theories of Divine Providence. Vigiliae Christianae, vol. 37, No. 2. (June 1983). Pp. 141-156.

I have started with this passage from Maximus having in mind his teaching on natural will or energy. Maximus emphasizes that all human beings have one nature, and that when we move according the *logos* of our nature we are not sinning. On the other hand, our sinful condition (the possibility to sin) is characterized by our very ability to reflect and to chose, which Maximus connects with a notion of a *gnomic* will. Saints in God do not choose, for being deified they are entirely in God's will. Or as Maximus says, there is "one energy of God and those worthy of Him" (Amb. 7 PG 91, 1076C). If we return now to the case described above, we can see that in his recognition that God's providence that works in us when we are "caught by a great need," Maximus stresses that the action of Providence is prior to our reflection. God's providence works in us in this case immediately through the movement of our nature towards God. God draws us to Himself even before we chose to pray or not to pray, before any reflection. It is clear that in this case our possibility to chose, our "*gnome*" is not at work. God Himself in this case is working in us through His providence inherent to our nature.

Let us leave for a while a theme of Providence and turn to most contentious theme of modern Orthodox theology and thought – a theme of human hypostasis, or personhood. Then I will try to connect this theme with a theme of Providence with support from St Maximus.

II. Hypostasis of man: theological and philosophical perspectives.

In thinking about the Orthodox notion of hypostatic or personal being, I would like first of all to stress that I see the crucial moment of the formation of the Orthodox understanding of the human person in the polemics against Apollinarius and Nestorius, rather than the Orthodox Trinitarian theology that emerged from the Arian controversy. To reexamine the specific issues that prompted this development, I would like to start with Apollinarius.

Apollinarius sought to avoid two beings in the incarnate Word of God, so he substituted human mind with Logos. Unlike Apollinarius however, the Cappadocian Fathers were not afraid of recognizing a human mind in Christ. Indeed, they insisted that Christ has it. They did not consider mind or reasonable soul as being in itself human being- and hence a hypostasis. Later in the Nestorian controversy Orthodox theology insisted on the existence of both a reasonable soul and body in Christ, that is, all human nature. At the same time Orthodox theologians rejected the idea that besides the Hypostasis of the Word there could be

some human being in Christ, that is -- a hypostasis of human nature. Thus nor mind, neither flesh, nor both of them can be identified with the human hypostasis.

Let us interpret this theological teaching from philosophical point of view. When we, following the language of the Fathers, say that hypostasis (any hypostasis, be it a stone, a horse, a man or an angel) is some being, we say that it exists as such. This means that it remains the same. Sameness or identity is a basis for our understanding of "hypostasis". Something is called hypostasis because it subsists as such and remains the same. Now, since in dogmatic theology of the Fathers it was stated that mind or flesh, or both of them are something that cannot be called human hypostasis, it means that mind or flesh do not constitute our identity as persons. The most important aspect of this statement is that our mind and consciousness are not determinants of our personal identity. That constituted a radical break with the Platonic philosophical tradition.

The identity of the "hypostasis" of man with his eternal soul is one of the typical features of ancient philosophy and the pagan world view as such. For Plato the soul "precedes" the body with which it is united in an accidental and not entirely natural way, as a pilot to a ship, or a rider to a horse (cf. *Phaedo* , 246a, 247c). In that sense the body is not fully human: man is his soul; man is a soul using a body (cf. *Alcibiades Major* , I, 130a-131a). Man dies (that is "strips" himself from the perishable body), and his soul, which was a mover of his body, remains and passes to eternity. In fact, it has come from eternity… As is well known, one of the main ways to prove eternity of the soul for platonic thought was its "ever-movement." Something that moves eternally and does not need any external mover (unlike the body) – is eternal. And since it is eternal, it remains itself eternally, that is, it can be considered a "hypostasis."

Identity of the soul even within this logic has a bit different presupposition than its eternity. For example, Plato's identity of the soul is grounded in the form of its contemplation of eternal ideas. However, since such contemplation is possible because of the eternity of the soul, we return to the question of soul's eternity. Indeed, what is the ground of "ever-movement", and, therefore of identity of the soul? It is clear that the body cannot be such a ground, because it is moved by the soul itself and inconstant. Such is the reason why the autonomous mobility of the soul is questioned in Neo-Platonism. One cannot derive the soul's capacity for self-directed motion from the fact that it moves its body. Eternity of the soul as well as its eternal motion in Neo-Platonism, as in Plotinus, is provided by God[3].

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[3]   See on this matter *Choufrine Arkadi*. On Eriugena's Appropriation of the Neoplatonic Concept of Self-Movement. Studi sull'Oriente Cristiano. v.9, no.1 [2005] pp. 83-110.

Plotinus reformulates the question of identity of the soul in greater detail. Not only do souls remain themselves, but every soul differs from others. The identity and difference of each soul is provided by its *logos*, by its idea (see *Enn.* 5.7). It is not clear, however, whether Plotinus remained faithful up to the end of his life to this concept of an individual soul's *logos* and what place this concept has in his system[4].

In any case **it was impossible for the Fathers after the Apollinarian and Nestorian controversies to identify the hypostasis of a human being with mind or reasonable soul, at least in a strict philosophical discourse.** Thus the problem of human identity -the problem of human hypostasis- remained an open one in Christian philosophy for some time.

Before we pass to the solution of this problem which I find in St Maximus let us speak about the problem of so-called *false hypostasis* which can be formulated within the Orthodox perspective. As we have already determined, neither mind nor body is the principle of our identity, of our "I am" for the Fathers. Nevertheless, in our everyday life we use this construction and we often pose (consciously or unconsciously) some kind of "I am" as something identical, same, or as a principle of identity of our existence. This context recalls the Cartesian Ego criticized sharply by existential philosophy. In *La Transcendance de L' Ego*, Sartre undermines the Cartesian Ego by showing that the return of a consciousness (or a mind) to itself as the same identical Ego through an act of reflection is imaginary[5].

However, it should be noted that in criticizing the Cartesian Ego existential philosophers did not consider that for Descartes the sameness of Ego was constituted not only in the act of reflection. For Descartes, the Ego's sameness derives from man's dependence on God. The very self-similarity of the soul is constituted by God (see *Meditation* 3). Of course it is possible to ignore this religious aspect of *Meditations* by treating references to God as a tribute to tradition- as Sartre did. However, it is not clear that such an approach is correct. That is why having agreed with existentialists that identity of Ego cannot be grounded on a character of an act of reflection we must note at the same time that, criticizing Descartes, existentialists neglected his thesis about the source of identity of the soul in God. There is simply no God for them.

Yet the manner in which God provides the Ego with its identity in Descartes is really not clear. To this ambiguity Heidegger adds the observation that Descartes' starting point for

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[4]   Kalligas (see *Kalligas P*. Forms of Individuals in Plotinus: A Re-Examination. Phronesis. 42, 1997. P. 206–227) states that Plotinus believed in *logoi* of individual souls up to the end of his life. However, some other scholars hold another view (see. observations of these views in Мельник С. *Плотин об идеях единичных вещей //* Логос. 16, 1999. С. 59–67.

[5]   See Sartre Jean-Paul *La Transcendance de L' Ego: Esquisse d'une description phénomenologique*, in *Recherches Philosophiques*, VI, 1936-37.

the Ego's foundation is in *thinking of thinking*- a situation already removed from the essence of human being. The point of departure for Descartes is mind itself, not human being in its integral and embodied being-in-the world[6].

We find a variety of philosophical positions bearing on the problem of the identity of human being in ancient and modern philosophy. For Descartes and tradition which springs from him, there is the identity of Ego grounded in the being of God; but it is not clear how God constitutes and maintains it, and furthermore this Ego is not an integral human being. As for existentialism, it is impossible to speak here about any human hypostasis because of an absence of God, who is the basis for identity of the soul in Neo-Platonism and in Cartesian thought.

In any case I want to underline once more that twentieth century philosophy's "unmasking" of the Ego's pretension to be a hypostasis corresponds to the refusal of the Church Fathers to identify soul or mind with hypostasis during the Christological controversies about sixteen centuries ago. However, philosophy of the twentieth century, at least some of its leading figures had to pay a great price for this conclusion - refusing to believe in God's being and therefore in being of a human hypostasis.

Let us now turn to the solution of the problem of human hypostasis emerging from the work of St Maximus.

III. God's Providence and Human Personhood in St Maximus the Confessor.

The problem of human hypostasis was not posed by Maximus as such, for he was much more interested in ascetical and soteriological issues than pure philosophy. However, his understanding of the problem can be extrapolated from his writings. Maximus elaborated his system as part of his criticism of Origenism. Insofar as Origenism is a kind of Christian Platonism in its idea of eternal existence of minds, Maximus should have elaborated some alternative to this system, and indeed, as we know, he did it in his theory of eternal *logoi.* Due to the scope of this theory it cannot be elaborated fully here; however, I would like to examine some of its facets which are relevant to our theme.

Maximus' teaching on *logoi* is closely connected with his teaching on God's Providence which has two main sources – Nemesius of Emesa and Pseudo-Dionysius. From Nemesius Maximus takes an idea of God's providence not only for species (or nature) but

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[6]   See Heidegger Martin. Sein und Zeit. I. 3. § 21-24.

also for individuals[7]. From Ps.-Dionysius Maximus takes his theory of God's processions (*proodoi*) through which God realizes His Providence. Thus connecting these two ideas Maximus writes that God Who is not participated according to His essence (*ousia*) is participated according His "providential procession" (κατὰ δὲ τὴν προνοητικὴν πρόοδον). To this he adds: "Each [intellectual] being, according to its *logos* [of each], which is in God, is called a part (= member) of God, and is said as having place in God. Certainly, if [such being] moves according to it [i.e. its *logos*] with wisdom and reason, it comes to God filling its own place [which suits for it] and making up the beauty [of the whole] as a useful member of Christ's body" *(QD* 173.1–16, ed. Declerck*)*[8].

Thus instead of the Platonic doctrine of eternal minds, Maximus elaborates a theory of eternal providential *logoi*. As noted above, one finds in Maximus not only a notion of the "*logos* of nature" but also a notion of the *logos* of each particular rational being. This idea is highlighted in Amb. 7 (2 ad Jn): "Thus, each spiritual and rational [being], i.e. angels and human beings, according to that very *logos* by which it was created (that is in God and to God (Jn. 1:1)) is called "a particle of God" for the reason that its *logos* is preexistent in God (as has already been said). It goes without saying, that if [such creature] moves according to it [i.e. its *logos*], it will be in God, in whom the *logos* of its being preexists as [its] beginning and reason" (PG 91, 1080).

Speaking about the fulfillment of God's Providence towards creatures and calling this fulfillment Pentecost, Maximus writes; "*The mystery of Pentecost consists in the immediate union with Providence of those whom this Providence knew before" (*Thal. 65, PG 90, 760; ed. Laga/Steel 65.549-552).

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[7]   See De natura hominis. XLIII-IV. Maximus also repeats Nemesius' definition: "Providence is, then, according to the God-bearing Fathers, the care (ἐπιμέλεια) that comes from God to the things that are"(Amb 10. PG 91 1189). This understanding of Providence as God's care for creation is very fruitful but its elaboration is a task for a future research. However, I would like to note here that understanding of Providence as **care** perhaps can be interpreted in the light of existential dimension of "care" that has been found in philosophy of Martin Heidegger. As is well known, care occupies an important, even central role for him. *Dasein* in its ontological definition is not a thinking substance, it is an understanding — i. e. first of all, a caring — "instance": instead of the Cartesian (and, in fact, Husserlian) *cogito ergo sum* comes *curo ergo sum*. This philosophical observation, being properly interpreted and transformed, perhaps, can also be applied to our thinking about personal and living God at least in His Providential activity.

[8]   Ἕκαστον γὰρ τῶν γεγονότων κατὰ τὸν ἑαυτοῦ λόγον, τὸν ἐν τῷ θεῷ ὄντα, μέλος θεοῦ λέγεται εἶναι καὶ τόπον ἐν τῷ θεῷ ἔχειν· ἀμέλει τοι καὶ εἰ κατ' αὐτὸν κινηθείη σοφῶς τε καὶ λελογισμένως, ἐν τῷ θεῷ γενήσεται, τὸν ἑαυτοῦ τόπον πληρῶν καὶ τὴν εὐπρέπειαν ἐν τῷ σώματι τοῦ Χριστοῦ ὡς μέλος εὔχρηστον ἐργαζόμενος. In the same passage Maximus also speaks about reasonable beings which "lose their own *logos* and rush to non-being". However, the problem of the "lost *logos*", the ontology of evil in Maximus deserves a special attention and I will not analyze it in this paper.

Unlike Plotinus who casually speaks about the *logos* (or idea) of each soul, Maximus speaks about the *logos* of the whole human being, rejecting the preexistence and eternal existence of souls. At the same time he connects this theory of *logoi* with a general understanding of God's providence, bearing in mind that this Providence concerns not only species but also individuals (see Amb. 10, PG 1191 f).

Now, we may say that the problem of the irreducibility of the human hypostasis to any part of human nature can be solved theologically with the aid of Maximus' theory of *logoi*. Maximus considers the *logoi* as God's will for each human being- the "place" of this being in God, or rather in the Body of Christ.

In Amb. 7, speaking about the fulfillment of God's providence for spiritual creatures Maximus recalls St Basil's description of final rest in God: *"One approaches (this state) after one's entrance into one's own place of spiritual peace (or rest), being in which one will not be moved from one's place...."*. I believe both Basil's and Maximus' descriptions have one biblical source – Hebr.(4:10-11). On the other hand, this rest and peace has been connected in the Bible with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit and the prophecy about the final rest of the people of God in secure dwellings (Is. 32.15-18). In Thal. 65 Maximus, speaking about God as our Pentecost, gives a detailed explanation of the meaning of these "resting places." It is clear from this description that Maximus understands the "dwelling places" of Is. 32: 18 or of Jn: 14. 2. ("*In My Father's house there are many dwelling places*" as God's thoughts, "principles," or "councils" about everything, which is moved by these principles[9].

Thus, each human or angelic hypostasis has its place in God, which is nothing else but God's will. This resting "place" may be understood as the true principle of identity of hypostasis. The *logos* of an individual spiritual being is the possibility of this individual's being in time, and in its realization becomes the very being of this individual in eternity. **Thus the notion of human hypostasis is inseparable from the notion of its transcendent *logos*.** J.-Cl. Larchet, a prominent Maximus' scholar, formulated this teaching on the *logoi* of individuals in most articulated way: "Un être singulier répond à un *logos* propre qui le caractérise et fait de lui un individu distinct et unique, et lui confère une valeur et un destin propres par rapport à Dieu (une place particulière dans la demeure du Père). C'est ainsi qu'il y a un *logos* pour chaque être qui a existè, existe ou existera. Il répond aussi à un *logos* qui définit son essence ou sa nature…"[10].

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[9]   For more detailed analysis see: Grigory Benevich. The Sabbath in St Maximus the Confessor. Studi sull'Oriente Cristiano. v.9, no.1 [2005] pp. 63-82.

[10]   Larchet J.-C. *La divinisation de l'homme selon saint Maxim le Confesseur*. Paris, 1996. P. 113.

Speaking about the difference between the *logos* of human nature and the *logos* of an individual (or hypostasis) we must note that Maximus stresses here a kind of dialectics of particular and universal. God's aim is the salvation of particular persons. However, according to Maximus, self-affirmation of one's individuality through one's particular individual will (*gnome*) is sinful. One becomes a member of Christ's body, i.e. obtains his own dwelling place in God, one's true identity, through movement according to the common *logos* of our nature, through following God's will; and in Christ our human nature and will is inseparable from God's will. In Thal. 2 Maximus writes: "Through his Providence God likens particular beings to common things (πρὸς τὰ καθόλου) until He unites their free aspiration with their inherent common *logos* of reasonable nature through the movement of particular being towards good-being. In this he makes them move identically and harmoniously with each other and with the whole, so that particular beings have no intentional [or deliberate] (γνωμικὴν) differences with regards to what is common (τὰ καθόλου)."

If we now return to the problem of false Ego so often constituted in everyday life, we may say that in a sinful state of consciousness this Ego is a source of will. Saying "I want to eat" we mean some Ego, some "I am" who wills to eat. Ontological basis for sin is our selfish self-affirmation that corresponds to the false construction of our Ego and results in sinful passions.

As for Maximus, in his controversy against monophelites he insisted that there is no such thing as "personal will" or "personal energy," neither in Christ nor in us. Will and energy belongs to nature. Yes, there is deliberation of human hypostasis, but "deliberate will" (*gnome*) is not a will, properly speaking; it is a choice how to use natural will. That's why St John of Damascus says that hypostasis is a user of [natural] energy (ἐνεργῶν δὲ ὁ κεχρημένος τῇ ἐνεργείᾳ ἤτοι ἡ ὑπόστασις (De fide Orth. 59)). As for the way of using this energy, through participation in the body of Christ we obtain grace to deliver our entire *gnome* to God. Perfect deified saints deliver their *gnome* to God up to the end, so that He works in them and entirely frees them from the burden of deliberation, and there is "one energy of God and those worthy of Him" (Amb. 7 PG 91, 1076C).

The mind which has not yet found peace in God is a potential source for this false hypostasis. On the contrary, the mind which has found peace in God has found its dwelling place in its *logos*. Being fulfilled, this *logos* becomes a place of rest for the mind, as well as for the flesh.

To make a conclusion in my interpretation of St Maximus' understanding of human hypostasis, I would say, that **true hypostasis is nothing else but a "place of rest" of one's**

mind and flesh, a place of rest which can be found only in God[11]**.** It is that very "place" which is an end of movement of the faithful to God. Nevertheless, Maximus says that even in the state of rest saints are in the state of an ever-moving rest (αεικίνητος στάσις) in God in which they abundantly receive God's inexhaustible grace. This theme has been addressed by other scholars[12] and I will not develop it here.

If we now ask what the principle of our personal being is, the answer, according to St Maximus, is God's providence for each of us[13]. This providence can only be realized through participation in God's providence for the human race through the Incarnate Word of God- and participation in Christ's Mystical Body, the Church.

One must note, however, that for Maximus participation in the Church does not necessary mean participation in local church organization. As we know from his biography, Maximus himself rejected participation in heretical church organizations of his time. To participate in Christ's Body means to be at one with Tradition of the Church Fathers, to be one spirit with them. In this perspective our true personhood cannot be reduced to any social role, even to any role in church as organization. St Maximus, for example, rejected the role of the Father (*abba*) of the whole Church of Constantinople and the whole Byzantine Empire which was offered to him by Emperor Constant[14].

As we know from the "Documents from exile" Maximus accepted his imprisonment as the fulfillment of God's providence. The text of "Dispute at Bizya" recollects this moment: Bishop Theodosius (envoy of the Emperor and the Patriarch), entering a place of Maximus' imprisonment "said to Maximus: 'How are you, my lord Father?' Maximus said to him: 'As God preordained before all ages and decided in His providence, that's how I am'"[15]. Following the Tradition of the Church Fathers, i.e. fulfilling God's will as he understood it, he has obtained his true personhood, becoming Christ's confessor.

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[11] Let us compare this understanding of "hypostasis" with accepted Church dogma. Orthodox theology says that there is no human hypostasis in the Incarnate Word of God. This means that His mind and body have their Hypostasis in the Hypostasis of the Word of God. The Word of God (Logos) is a "dwelling place" for Christ's mind and body, a "place" of their "rest".

[12] See for example: Blowers Paul. *Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Concept of "Perpetual Progress". Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Jun., 1992), pp. 151-171

[13] In my next paper I plan to show that the lack of attention to this theme is one of the main reasons of the tension between the approaches to personhood of famous Russian and Greek theologians -- Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas, which has been recently pointed out by Aristotle Papanikolaou in his interesting article: Divine energies or divine Person: Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas on Conceiving the Transcendent and Immanent God. Modern Theology 19:3 (July 2003). Pp. 357-385).

[14] See Maximus the Confessor and His Companions. Documents from Exile / Ed. and trans. by Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. (DsB 9) p. 107.

[15] Ibid. DsB 3. p. 77-79.

I gave this example to show that, as Maximus teaches us by his works and life, we may live playing this or that social role, or in God's will obtaining our true personhood[16]. At least saints witness to us about such a life when they say with Apostle Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

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[16] It does not mean that saints cannot play social roles or important roles in the church organizations (as we know, they do play them). However, their roles originate from their true personhood found in God (as we see from the example of St Maximus), and not the other way round, when "personhood" is a result of the roles accepted in the church and society.