

Mystagogical Understanding of Human Sensation (αἴσθησις), Reason (λόγος) and Intellect (νοῦς): the Dynamic Epistemology of St Maximos the Confessor

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Introduction

To every word of my title one could devote a whole lecture, but I will try to limit myself to anthropology, that is to a human being asking the following question: What do I understand myself to be? A modern answer would be: a system of organs and neurons interacting in an intricate way. This answer is of the analytical kind for which we use our reasoning power, in Greek λογιστικόν or just λόγος. This answers also a related question: “*How* do I understand myself?” By using my discursive mind, dissecting and analysing tiny bits and thus assembling the jigsaw puzzle of the human being.

Another approach would be to first look at the whole picture, to take as the point of departure the wholeness of man – he or she as a unified whole with a face¹ to talk to and listen to,

¹ As has already been pointed out by many scholars, the Greek word πρόσωπον can mean both face and person. An example of the first use is St. Maximos the Confessor writing in *Q.Thal.* 54: “The face of such an intellect is the intelligible disposition of the hiddenness of the soul, in which all the characters of the virtues can be found.”; Πρόσωπον οὖν ἐστὶ τοῦ τοιοῦτου νοῦς ἢ κατὰ τὸ κρυπτόν τῆς ψυχῆς νοουμένη διάθεσις, ἐν ᾗ τῶν ἀρετῶν πάντες ὑπάρχουσιν οἱ χαρακτῆρες; *Maximi Confessoris Quaestiones ad Thalassium: una cum latina interpretatione Ioannis Scotti Eriugenaе iuxta posita*, CCSG

autonomous and with a free will and thus also responsible for his or her actions. The answer to the second question (“How do I understand myself?”) would then be: by using your νοῦς, your “spiritual intellect” or just “intellect” if we follow Philip Sherrard and his fellow translators of the *Philokalia*.² Clearly, “intellect” as it is commonly understood today is not an adequate translation of this key word in Eastern patristic and liturgical texts, nor is the vague term “mind,” which derives from the Latin *mens* (represented in the title as “mental”); Eriugena uses both *intellectus* and *animus* to translate νοῦς into Latin.³ As a member of a team translating Orthodox liturgical texts I have come to the point that I think it is probably best to simply import νοῦς into Dutch; after all, we also have loanwords such as “stichar,” “kondak,” and “eros.” Of course, we could try to change the language by consistently using “intellect” as is now happening in English (after all, language is a semiotic system based on convention that evolves), but in Dutch the *denotational sememe* “rational” is so strong that we end up conveying the opposite of what we mean: rational, discursive understanding instead of spiritual, intuitive understanding. Leaving νοῦς untranslated also avoids the confusion resulting from both νοῦς and πνεῦμα being translated as “spirit” or “ghost,” as still happens in Dutch and French, and to the confusion is added fuzziness, if we then frequently have to qualify a term with the adjective “spiritual,” a word with many private meanings.

This wrestling with words and meanings is an example of the fragmentation rather than the wholeness of Orthodoxy in the West. Notions from the East have been transferred to Wes-

7, eds. Carl Laga and Carlos Steel (Turnhout: Brepols, 1980), 445. In my rendering of the Greek I am trying to remain close to the translation principles of Philip Sherrard on the basis of his notes for the glossary for the *Philokalia* (see the following footnote). These notes were kindly shown to me by his widow Denise Harvey.

² See *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, trans. & ed. G. E. H. Palmer et al, vol. 2 (London: Faber & Faber, 1981).

³ See Laga and Steel, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium I and Maximi Confessoris Quaestiones ad Thalassium II: una cum latina interpretatione Ioannis Scotti Eriugena iuxta posita*, CCSG 22, ed. Carl Laga and Carlos Steel (Turnhout: Brepols, 1990).

tern languages that had already developed their own theological vocabularies. How different was the task SS. Cyril and Methodius had before them; we will turn to them later.

Intellect (νοῦς), reason (λόγος) and sensation (αἴσθησις)

I will first transform the triad in the original title into terminology that comes closer to that of Maximos the Confessor, the brilliant mystagogue who was rediscovered in the previous century by Western and Eastern theologians alike and who will be the leading light for this paper. The following overview gives the alternative adjective, corresponding noun and translation. I also give for the three words connotations that indicate how I use them.

Spiritual	→	“intellectual”	νοῦς – intellect (“spiritual”)
Mental	→	“logical”	λόγος – reason (discursive, διάνοια)
Physical	→	“aesthetic”	αἴσθησις – sensation (perception)

Thus, I reframed the second part of the title by limiting myself to three organs of the soul: νοῦς, λόγος and αἴσθησις.⁴ Let us look first at the last one, αἴσθησις, “sensation” or “sense-perception” as Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware consistently translate it.⁵ It can be situated at the border between body and soul, the outside and the inside world of a human being. In the *Opusculum de anima* ascribed to Maximos he explains that αἴσθησις is an “organ of the soul, a power to receive things from outside through the senses.”⁶ The body and its relation to the soul, a subject worth a thorough study,⁷ will remain outside the scope of this paper.

⁴ Other authors that use this triad are, for example, Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* II, 11) and Elias Ekdikos; to the latter we will turn later. See also Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 174.

⁵ See Palmer, *Philokalia*, passim. I will use here the translation “sensation,” following Nicholas Conostas’s translation of the two volumes of Maximus’s, *The Ambigua* (Dumbarton Oaks: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁶ Ὅργανον ψυχῆς, δύναμις δι’ αἰσθητηρίων τῶν ἔξωθεν ἀντιληπτική (PG 91. 353–61).

⁷ See, for example: Adam G. Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor: Holy Flesh, Wholly Deified*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).