

A future-oriented synergetic freedom: The notion of freedom according to Saint Maximus the Confessor and its timeliness today

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The insistence of Saint Maximus the Confessor (pp. 580-662) to attempt in articulating an understanding of freedom that does not include choice, on the one hand, is the most emblematic endeavour to render an entire neptic tradition, which considered freedom as something different from the will itself, and on the other hand, it presents interesting challenges to the very different conception of freedom in modernity. It is on these two interrelated aspects that we will try to focus our study¹.

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1. This project presupposes and constitutes in a way the continuation of the extensive analysis of the concept of freedom of choice that we have made in our study: «Πρόσωπο, Άτομο και Γνώμη στη σκέψη του άγιου Μαξίμου του Όμολογητή», *Theologia* 84/3 (2013) 65-110. In the present article we restate the main elements of the concept of the freedom of choice, but for a full analysis of the process of the will according to St. Maximus the Confessor the reader is referred to our aforementioned analysis from a patristic perspective, which is here presupposed in order to insist more on the current existential stakes for today.

Absolute ontological freedom transcends choice

Why does St. Maximus insist that the fullest expression of freedom is superior to choice²? The reason is that the archetype of this understanding is uncreated divine freedom. The notion of choice presupposes conditions, so that one can choose between them. However, this concept of freedom is opposed to the uncreated reality of God, in Whom there is no condition presupposed in Him, since He is without beginning and timeless. Therefore, God is free not because he has an absolute choice, but precisely because he has a more fundamental freedom that precedes choice³. If we put it in an anthropomorphic analogy, we would say that divine freedom is not being able to choose paths, but making paths that did not exist. One could, of course, consider philosophically that God has an absolute infinity of choices at any given time, from which each time He chooses an element from the infinite. However, a similar view would introduce contingency into the divine being, and for this reason it is considered more appropriate that God does not will by choosing between infinite options, but that -on the contrary- his freedom is a pure positivity that does not pass through the rejection of other contingencies. This is also the meaning of the reasons of beings. According to the Areopagitic tradition, the reasons of beings are God's wills, which are not His choices for creation, but pure positivities, that is, outbursts of God's love in which meditation does not mediate⁴.

2. For a very enlightening and philosophically thorough discussion on the subject see, I. McFarland, "The Theology of the Will", in Pauline Allen - N. Bronwen (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015, pp. 516-532.

3. For the importance of the distinction between created and the non-created regarding the question of freedom, see J. D. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, London/New York: T&T Clark 2008, pp. 91-98.

4. On this approach of the words as God's will, see *Πρὸς Θαλάσσιον*, *Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca* (hereafter: CCSG) 7, 95, 8, PG 90, 296A. On this subject in Areopagite corpus, see *Περὶ θεῶν ὀνομάτων*, 5, 8, PG 3, 824C. Cf. also Beate Regina Suchla, *Corpus Dionysiacum I. De Divinis Nominibus*, Berlin/New York: De Gruyter 1990, p. 188, 6-10. On the reaction of the Alexandrian tradition on this approach, see P. Sherwood, *The Earlier Ambigua of Saint Maximus the Confessor and His Refutation of*

It should be noted, by the way, that the concepts of "freedom" and "will" are not necessarily identical. There can be an ontological notion of freedom that is more profound than the psychological notion of freedom located at the level of the will. Freedom pervades the whole being of God, without being necessarily and exclusively identified with the common will of the three Substances.

Having a similar divine archetype (or rather an eschatotype since the whole truth is realized in the eschatological Kingdom) of his freedom, man as God's image aspires existentially to a freedom superior to choosing. Herein is the adventure of what St. Maximus calls the "freedom of choice". The latter has two meanings: the main one, which concerns the created reality without necessarily being connected with the sin, and a secondary one, which is connected with the fall. The fundamental meaning of the freedom of choice is that it is "a disposition"⁵, i.e. how man is disposed towards what transcends him, and more specifically against God and the world around him. This ontologically fundamental meaning of the freedom of choice is not necessarily connected with the fall, but rather with creatureliness. The uncreated God does not have a freedom of choice, precisely because he is not disposed against pre-existing conditions, but has positive freedom. Even the three Divine Substances are not disposed towards each other, as they are co-ordinates and have an uncreated love that is ontologically much more primary than a loving disposition. Yet man, precisely because he is a created person, certainly turns his freedom towards the pre-existing personal God and towards the world that He created; that is why St. Maximus considers him to have a preexistent freedom of choice identical with this disposition.

However, the eschatological truth of the issue is that this freedom of will is not the ultimate word in the mystery of human freedom, since man will eventually attain fuller freedom that transcends it. This fuller

Origenism, Rome 1955, pp. 175-176.

5. On the definition of the cognitive will as a disposition, see *Ἔργα Θεολογικά και Πολεμικά* 1, PG 91, 17C.

freedom is realized in the God-man Christ and is fully manifested in the eschatological kingdom. Hence, according to St. Maximus, freedom of choice is not an essential element of freedom⁶. In order to understand better this issue, however, we need to review the development of the concept of freedom and will in St. Maximus. In antiquity the term *will* was not part of the standard vocabulary of philosophy⁷. The terms *ἐθέλω* (to will) and *θέλησις* (will) belonged more to the vocabulary of the poets and the Homeric tradition than to the philosophical one as such; but the latter referred mainly to volition (*βούλησις*), which, however, according to the Aristotelian percepts, belonged to the intellect and followed it as a by-product. The term *θέλημα* (will), however, is found in the Gospels in the dramatic prayerful dialogue between Christ and the Father at Gethsemane, and has ever since been used by Christian theologians with a particularly existential burden. Especially St. Maximus the Confessor claims a place in the history of philosophy, for the reason that he made the will an integral power of the human soul, a tremendous philosophical

6. For the theory of the will in Saint Maximus the Confessor we rely mainly on the following works (among many others written on the same subject): D. Barthellos, *The Byzantine Christ. Person, Nature and Will in the Christology of St Maximus the Confessor*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004; A. de Halleux, *Patrologie et oecuménisme*, Leuven 1990, pp. 113-214; R. A. Gauthier, "Saint Maxime le Confesseur et la psychologie de l'acte humain", *Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale* 21 (1954) 51-100; J.-Cl. Larchet, *La Divinisation de l'Homme selon Saint Maxime le Confesseur*, Paris: Cerf 1996; J.-Cl. Larchet, *Saint Maxime le Confesseur (580-662)*, Paris: Cerf 2003; J.- Cl. Larchet, *Personne et Nature. La Trinité- Le Christ - L'homme*, Paris: Cerf 2011; A. Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, London/New York : Routledge 1996; P. Sherwood, *The Earlier Ambigua of St. Maximus the Confessor and his Refutation of Origenism*, *Studia Anselmiana* 36, Rome 1955; L. Thurnberg, *Microcosm and Mediator, The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, Lund 1965; M. Törönen, *Union and Distinction in the Thought of St Maximus the Confessor*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007; J. Zizioulas, "Person and nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor", in M. Vasilievic (ed.), *Knowing the Purpose of Creation through the Resurrection. Proceedings of the Symposium on St Maximus the Confessor*, Belgrade, October 18-21, 2012, Alhambra CA: Sebastian Press 2013, pp. 85-113.

7. For the theory of will's evolution in ancient Greek thought we rely on A. Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity*, [Sather Classical Lectures 48], Berkeley: University of California Press 1982.

development that in the West took place with St. Augustine of Hippo⁸. Whereas for the ancient Greeks the will was secondary to and followed the intellect, for St. Maximus the physical will (*φυσικὸν θέλημα*) is an extremely primary dimension of the existential event and is linked to the movement of beings⁹, which in its most ontological dimension is linked to their tendency towards perfection in the future.

Αὐτεξούσιον and *ἐλεύθερον*: the two dimensions of freedom

In St. Maximus we find mainly two terms for freedom: the *αὐτεξούσιον* and the *ἐλεύθερον*¹⁰. The most important aspect of human nature is the word «*αὐτεξούσιον*», which is connected with movement. It means that the human being in particular participates with awareness in his movement, which leads him to perfection, unlike other beings that can move externally and not participate in their movement towards completion (inanimate beings) or can move on the basis of vital impulse (plants) or senses (animals) and not with mental self-awareness. Freedom as self-expression therefore has a dynamic character¹¹. In this journey that is life, man moves to complete his nature and his whole being in the future, and the *αὐτεξούσιον* lies in the fact that unlike inanimate beings,

8. On the possible dependence of Saint Maximus the Confessor on Augustine of Hippo, in the context of his general dependence on the Cappadocian Fathers, see G. Ch. Berthold, "The Cappadocian Roots of Maximus the Confessor", in F. Heinzer – Chr. Schönborn (eds), *Maximus Confessor. Actes du Symposium sur Maxime le Confesseur*. Fribourg, 2-5 septembre 1980, [Paradosis 27], Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse 1982, pp. 51-59.

9. *Ζήτησις μετὰ Πύρρου* PG 91, 352A.

10. For the distinction between the *αὐτεξούσιον* and *ἐλεύθερον* in the thought of Saint Maximus the Confessor, we rely mainly on M. Doucet, *Dispute de Maxime le Confesseur avec Pyrrhus*. Introduction, texte critique et notes, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Montreal, Centre for Medieval Studies, Montreal 1972, pp. 181-190.

11. We elaborate extensively on what this "running" ontology means in D. Skliris, *On the Road to Being. Saint Maximus the Confessor's Synodical Ontology*, Alhambra CA: Sebastian Press 2018.

plants and animals, man participates mentally in his movement. Of this special gift of God to man, the latter can however abuse it by deviating from the path of perfection or even by ceasing to be in alignment or by regressing by reversing the path to being into a backward path to non-being. In any case, for St. Maximus, freedom, especially of the *ἀυτεξούσιον*, is a freedom in course. It is a freedom on the way to an eschatological end, that is, to a horizon. And the basic stake of freedom is whether it will lead to a straightening out or, in the opposite case, to some futile cancellation of this drive towards eschatological perfection. The term *ἐλεύθερον* on the other hand is used mainly to denote man's liberation from limitations, whether due to sin or even to creatureliness, a liberation achieved by the grace of God¹².

The nominalist inversion of the notion of freedom in the late Middle Ages

In any case, what we can maintain is that this understanding of freedom in the Neptic tradition, as summarized by St. Maximus the Confessor, is not an indifferent freedom without a horizon, as we often see in the modern concept of freedom¹³. The modern understanding of freedom originates from the philosophical movement of nominalism in the late Middle Ages. Nominalism is a philosophical movement that is associated with voluntarism and mechanocracy and opposes, respectively realism, intellectualism, and teleology that prevailed earlier in the medieval thought¹⁴. Realism answers the ontological question and implies that

12. See, e.g. *Ἐπιστολὴ Θ'*, PG 91, 448C.

13. See McFarland, "The Theology of the Will", *op.cit.*, p. 52

14. For this overview we rely mainly on the following studies: P. Kondylis, *Κριτική τῆς Μεταφυσικῆς στὴ Νεότερη Σκέψη: Ἀπὸ τὸν ὄψιμο Μεσαίωνα ὡς τὸ τέλος τοῦ Διαφωτισμοῦ*, Athens: Gnosi 1983; Ch. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press 1989; M. Mpegzos, *Νεοελληνικὴ Φιλοσοφία τῆς Θρησκείας*, Athens: Ellinika Grammata 1998; N. Loudovikos, *Ἡ κλειστὴ πνευματικότητα καὶ τὸ νόημα τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ: Ὁ μυστικισμὸς τῆς ἰσχύος καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια*

universal concepts, such as humanity, justice, or an animal species, are real ("realia"). It is connected to intelligibility at the cognitive level, which means that these universals can be approached by cognition, and to teleology, which means that universals have intrinsic purposes, which are grasped by cognition. The great reversal that occurred in the late Middle Ages is that realism was replaced by nominalism, a movement that holds at the ontological level that universals (e.g., humanity, justice, or an animal species) are mere names (*nomina*) without an ontological basis, while the truth is contained in individuals. Nominalism is linked to voluntarism in the sense that each individual has an arbitrary will of his own, which is uncontrollable in terms of a superior universality. The current of nominalism rejects teleology: since it does not believe in universals, it does not even accept that there are end-goals that are appropriate to them. That is why it ultimately contributed to a mechanistic understanding of the world: if all that exists ontologically is the individuals, then the main causality is mechanics, i.e. how individuals interact with each other (we are referring here mainly to the individuals of physics, but by extension also of human society), coalesce, collide, fuse, etc. In this way, the nominalist denial of teleology was linked to the unified physical-mathematical science that emerged at the dawn of modernity, mainly from the 16th century onwards.

These changes have profoundly affected our understanding of freedom. The pre-modern teleological understanding of freedom had a connection with a horizon of purpose or end. Man was considered free to follow the order of purposes inherent in the universality of his nature and its meaning deviate from it or regress. On the contrary, the modern individual of the nominalist world, the world where universals are mere names without ontological background, claims freedom without a horizon. It is a freedom of the present, where the individual, as sovereign, chooses without reference to an axiom of values.

Freedom as randomness and as a "ghost in the machine" in modernity

Here, however, two crucial interrelated issues arise for the modern concept of freedom. The first issue is that such freedom is difficult to distinguish from randomness. If the freedom of the individual is not in dialogue neither with a Creator as its first cause, nor with a horizon of meaning, nor with a collectivity, the universality of its nature, then two things happen: either there is no freedom, since everything is conditioned in a deterministic way by the mechanical nature of the individual, or, if there is freedom, it occurs in spite of the mechanical individual nature. But in this case freedom is something intangible, like a "ghost in the machine", and can hardly be distinguished from arbitrary reason or ultimately from randomness. Finally, freedom in modernity has taken on all these features: Since nature was understood as a mechanism of interaction of individual elements, deciphered by the new unified physical-mathematical science, freedom can only be understood as one of two things: either as an illusion, due to temporary ignorance of the laws governing this mechanistic world, or as a spectrum, which paradoxically escapes the laws of mechanics. In the latter case, it is understood as a mysterious escape from the world of science. In this case, it is also impossible to identify how this freedom differs from extreme contingency, from something so completely arbitrary that it is ultimately random.

Certainly some philosophers tried to reformulate the Christian vision of freedom within nominalist modernity. We mention the typical examples of two founders of modernity in philosophy: René Descartes (1596-1650) conceptualized freedom as an intuitive prism in a reflective subject that is detached from the world of extensible matter, ultimately referring this prism to God. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) reintroduced the element of the future and horizon into the understanding of freedom. Freedom was seen in a modern way, however, not as an *αὐτεξούσιον* in dialogue with the teleology of nature but as a demand for meaning brought by ethics dissociated from the world of science. Both Christian founders of

modernity are post-nominalist: In Descartes, freedom is like a matterless prism, a ghost in the machine, subjectively accessible, but impossible to influence the material world unless a "God of the machine" intervenes. And in Kant, who, however, we must admit that he made one of the most successful attempts to restore the element of the future to the consideration of the *αὐτεξούσιον*, freedom is a demand of ethics, which conflicts with the world of nature and the science that comprehends it. It is an inherently confrontational freedom with nature, which is more sublime if it opposes the natural world and exerts moral violence on it. The nominalist understanding of freedom governs more or less all modernity, culminating in existentialism par excellence. In fact, the philosophy of the absurd indicates precisely a world in which purposes have been removed from nature and freedom is identified with the absence of reason.

The eschatological realism of the Eastern Fathers

Do these remarks imply that we have to return to a pre-modern era where the nominalistic concept of freedom had not yet emerged? Fortunately, the Eastern Fathers did not sharply pose the dilemma between realism and nominalism and contained elements of both schools of thought, which makes them still relevant today. For example, in the thought of St. Maximus the Confessor we find a radical argument in favour of the importance of concrete existence, that if all the hypostases of a general species disappear, then the species disappears with them, so that ultimately, in an Aristotelian way, the "prior", i.e. the primary existence, belongs to the individual while only the secondary belongs to the general¹⁵. A similar position is closer to nominalism, if one were to characterize it anachronistically. On the other hand, we also see the argument that reason, which is the beginning and the universality of beings, does not coexist with them, but remains unified and universal

15. See, e.g. *Ἔργα Θεολογικά καὶ Πολεμικά* PG 91, 149B; PG 91, 264C.

despite its diffusion to many individuals¹⁶. The above standpoint is closer to realism, as it seems to accept a universality of the rational principle, which is not influenced by its distribution to individuals but has a totally independent actual existence in relation to them¹⁷.

If we examine these arguments of Saint Maximus the Confessor (similar ones are found in Saint John Damascene and Saint Photius of Constantinople)¹⁸ from the point of view of the later history of Western thought, their coexistence seems paradoxical. In fact, there is no contradiction, for St. Maximus poses the question of universality and individuality in a completely different conceptual framework, so one can say that he is closer to an authentically Christian philosophy. In St. Maximus the Confessor, who in this context expresses a wider Neptic tradition, teleology is defined by eschatology. This signifies that the ends and purposes of nature do not have an autonomous naturalistic or biological substance but are realized only in Christ and are manifested for all humanity and creation in the eschata, and now only in a proactive manner. The eschatological version of teleology also implies a physical discontinuity between the beginning of nature and its purpose, which is the philosophical expression of the mystery of the Cross. In other words, nature can have purposes ordained by God, which guide it towards a horizon of meaning. But the realization of these purposes cannot be achieved by itself, as in Aristotelianism, but only by a supernatural modification of nature for its own sake.

Yet this makes crucial a self-surrender of nature to God, which, in a fallen context, can only be sacrificial, i.e., it must also pass through

16. See, *Περὶ διαφορῶν ἀποριῶν* PG 91, 1172B-D.

17. On the transcendence of the dichotomy between realism and nominalism in the thought of Saint Maximus, see J. D. Zizioulas, "Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor", *op.cit.*, pp. 85-113.

18. See, Sm. Markov, "Maximus' Concept of Human Will through the Interpretation of Photius of Constantinople and John Damascene", in M. Vinzent - S. Mitralexis (eds), *The Fountain and the Flood: Maximus the Confessor and Philosophical Enquiry*, vol. XV, *Studia Patristica LXXXIX*, Papers presented at the 17th International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford, Leuven/Paris/Bristol: Peeters 2017, pp. 215-232.

a readiness to die and self-sacrifice (not in a coercive way, as in the heresy of Donatism, but by trusting God for the time and manner of martyrdom). This discontinuity between the beginning and the end, which is the metaphysical expression of the mystery of the Cross, is at the same time the difference between an eschatological version of teleology versus a simple teleology like the one we see in Aristotle or in its Christian version in Thomas Aquinas.

The other dimension of eschatological teleology is the eschatological realism. The reasons of beings are realistic not in the metaphysical sense that they represent an ideal thing (*res*) independent of their implementation in particular human individuals. It is realistic in the sense that they refer to a fulfilment in the future, based on the inaugurated incarnation of the Logos Christ, whose full ontological manifestations we await in the eschatological Presence. The reason of humanity, for example, is the human nature of Christ, i.e. and what will be our own nature in the eschata. But the same is true of all physical qualities, e.g. of animals, plants, even inanimate/lifeless beings that their created nature is assumed by Christ. The reasons –according to the Alexandrian and Areopagitic tradition– are God’s wills, which means that in the history of creation they are not complete and fulfilled things, like in secular metaphysics, but dynamic signposts that accompany the created being on its journey, as they are reminders of how God wants things to be in the future.

However, there is an "expected realism" of reasons, since the Incarnation reveals to us God’s will for the natures of beings and the Eucharist is an ongoing experience of God in history. Similarly, we have eschatological intellectualism or, rather, a vision of intellect. The intellect in the Neptic tradition is not only the mere force that views ideas, as in ancient Greek tradition. And it is clearly not the possessive consciousness of later Western and modern conceptualism, which grasps a part of beings, creating an unrejected residue of what is pushed into the unconscious. The intellect in the Neptic tradition is a simple force that offers the person’s basic orientation, either towards God or the world. In the

first case, it takes with it the whole psychosomatic ensemble towards a transformative assimilation with simplicity of the attractive God. The truth of the intellect is better manifested in noetic prayer¹⁹, in which the intellect transcends the spectra of the world, following the simplicity of God, which, however, in the Christian tradition is not the simplicity of Greek metaphysics, which wants the simple to explain the multiple, but is identified with the impassivity of love.

Freedom comes from the future

In this context, then, freedom is also understood in dialogue with a horizon of the future. God creates the created natures through his words, which point them to a future completion in the Word of God, Christ. The freedom of the human person is, as we have seen, in the first place the *αὐτεξούσιον*, which means that man participates knowingly in the movement that leads his nature to its completion. This freedom also opens up the side effect of evil, which is mainly a deviation from straight heading or a regression to senseless brutality²⁰. In any case, it concerns a freedom of dialogue with the future, since the finite human reason is in dialogue with the future God has prepared for us. But it is not a restricted teleology, as in the metaphysical Western Middle Ages, because the reason of nature is not simply an entelechy of created nature. In the Eastern tradition, nature has thirst and is pursued by the word of God, which is a promise of future recreation from that thirst. It is mainly a thirst for immortality. Nevertheless, the word is not confined to nature but is instead a call for a free transcendence from the present mode of nature to another mode of nature, which will better fulfill the demands of that mode as well. In this sense every transcendence is

19. Βλ. *Κεφάλαια Περί Ἀγάπης* PG 90, 977C

20. For the association of evil with malice and bestiality, see e.g. the discussion on the distinction of the sexes in *Περί Διαφόρων Ἀποριῶν* PG 91, 1309.

also a hypostasis²¹; that is to say, every transcendence from one mode of nature is a transfer to another mode, which, however, constitutes a personal hypostatization of the same natural powers.

To give the key existential example, nature has a thirst for unbridled life, but the reason for this thirst is love, which is the only possibility for immortal completeness beyond death²². However, love is a super-natural event. It is desired by nature, but it is not contained in nature, which in itself, if it is cut off from its reason, is likely to be locked into a futile attempt at survival that triggers deadly vicious cycles. Note also that universality is not simply the idea of nature, as in platonic “realistic” metaphysics. Universality is a consubstantial of love according to the Trinitarian archetype, which is a continuous exercise for the created beings with an ascetic dimension. The *αὐτεξούσιον* is, therefore, the freedom of man to coordinate himself with a movement towards a future of unlimited fullness of being. Furthermore, it is complemented in the terminology of St. Maximus by *ἐλεύθερον*, which is the liberation from the temporary limits set by the created and especially from the enclosure in what is the sin. The *ἐλεύθερον* is a liberation due to the grace of God, which, however, is ontologically prior to nature. So also the *ἐλεύθερον* is an ecstatic freedom from the future, but for its sake nature was created in its origin. With this understanding we have a freedom that draws towards the future in the patristic tradition. But it is a future that is open and not closed, as in the metaphysical teleology of the Western Middle Ages, which was rejected in modernity. And it is also an open realism, since it means a co-acting verification of human nature together with the Incarnate Logos, who experienced the human condition from within and with Whom we are in constant dialogue. It is also a synthesis of intellect and will, which has neither the coercive

21. J. D. Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness. Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, london/New York: T&T Clark 2006, p. 213.

22. This approach is mainly based on the prayer of Christ in Gethsemane. See, the discussion in Fr.-M. Lethel, *Théologie de l'Agonie du Christ. La Liberté Humaine du Fils de Dieu et Son Importance Sotériologique Mises en Lumière par Saint Maxime le Confesseur*, Paris: Beauchesne 1979.

and conformist nature of metaphysical intellectualism, nor the selfish arbitrariness of modernist voluntarism.

Are those who have no power or authority free?

This last point needs further elaboration. The big existential question is whether freedom is associated with power. In the nominalist understanding of freedom, the arbitrariness of the individual is placed at the centre of freedom. It should be noted that, when we speak of "arbitrariness", we do not mean it in the particularly negative connotation that it has in the vernacular, but mainly in an etymologically conscious and philosophical sense of "own choice". In this philosophical sense, arbitrariness can be seen as a cultural acquisition, in so far as we are talking about the possibility for an individual to decide for himself, being free from a superior oppressive power. However, it remains an existential problem that this association of freedom with the *own choice* brings it problematically closer to power. And indeed, in the history of Western thought, the nominalist notion of freedom led to a modernist perception of freedom, which was associated with the bourgeoisie and resulted in Arthur Schopenhauer's (1788-1860) theory of the will or Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900) corresponding will to power. The latter can be seen as a mature self-consciousness²³ of the Western voluntarism that had already begun with Augustine of Hippo, who made the will an integral element of the personality, but which resulted in a will of the individual subject to extend his power. However, even if we take more Christian and ascetic versions of modern freedom, such as those of Kant, we will notice that modern freedom is still seen in opposition to heteronomy, whether the latter concerns the divine right of an external institutional authority, or whether it concerns its mechanistic nature and instincts. The result is that, even in its moral and ascetic view, freedom is understood as an authority. That is, on the one hand, it is seen as

23. See, N. Loudovikos, *Ἡ κλειστή πνευματικότητα καὶ τὸ νόημα τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ...*, op.cit.

self-determination that defies external legal and institutional authorities and, on the other hand, as power over the self and its nature, which can override nature, which is understood mechanistically, and subdue it by forcibly driving it towards moral perfection. What is celebrated in this modern Kantian and post-Kantian morality is freedom as the power of the autonomous subject over nature (himself first of all, but by extension also over the rest of external nature), over which he is sovereign and which he can control. In this way, however, the modern concept of freedom is identified with power over firstly the self and its nature and, by extension, over the nature of the surrounding world.

It would therefore be existentially relevant if freedom could be associated instead with weakness and humility. Can a person who is weak and has no control over himself and his environment be considered free? Of course, ironically, the signifier which in the Eastern tradition denoted freedom, i.e. autonomy, refers etymologically to exactly that, i.e. power over oneself. However, as we have seen, the signified refers more to the dialogue between the personal substance and the final movement of nature which the same substance negotiates. A similar understanding of freedom leaves more room for coexistence of freedom, weakness and humility. A person who does not aspire to power can nevertheless be free, in the sense that he humbly questions the meaning of nature, both of himself and of the world around him, and meditates with God's will for its future. Of course, this freedom can also take the form of continence (*ἐγκράτεια*), which, if understood etymologically, means a state, a power over the self and its nature. However, the deeper meaning of infinite asceticism is to surrender with existential gentleness to a meaning of God that comes from the future –that is, the reasons of beings– and with which we can, according to grace coordinate, while remaining in itself apophatically unknowable in its deeper substance. This understanding of freedom is a freedom of participation and not of possession. It is the freedom to participate in the movement of our nature without owning it. It is a freedom that is not bound by created norms, since neither created nature (as in Aristotelian and Aquinasian

naturalism), nor the arbitrariness of the same will (as in the opposite nominalist bourgeoisie) is a norm. In this way, a vicious dichotomy is deconstructed, in the direction not of another norm, which would mean an alternative power, but of a constitution of the future together with God.

The Incarnation as the ontological basis of an interactive moral independence

In this way, the other vicious dichotomy of modernity, the one between autonomy and heteronomy, is also deconstructed. The basis of our emancipation, of *freedom* through grace, is that the *Logos* himself, the sense of created nature, has become human, so that He himself speaks to us from a depth of our human autonomy, addressing us through a deeper selfhood. But we are free in as much as we are given the possibility to converse with this deeper voice of the incarnate Word within us. This “humble freedom” results from the dilemma between autonomy and heteronomy. Freedom certainly has an element of autonomy, since it implies -and in the orthodox understanding of it- a subjective participation, which is a uniquely human being, which distinguishes us from the animate or inanimate being. But this autonomy is also a heteronomy, since the voice of the incarnate Word speaks in us, who in His essence is a divine Person and, as such, a divine final cause or sense of nature.

In this dialogue, in this synergy, the mystery of synergetic freedom is played out. In this sense, we can also interpret the insistence of St. Maximus the Confessor that the mystery of freedom is played out in a dialogue between, on the one hand, the natural will, that is, the thirst and impulse of nature which is triggered by the divine word within it, and, on the other hand, the personal will, that is, how a person modifies and shapes with his own freedom this natural will²⁴. On the contrary, the

24. On this regard, see, *Ἔργα Θεολογικά καὶ Πολεμικά* 1, PG 91, 9-38

third level, that of opinion, that is, the sovereign decision and choice of the individual, is fundamentally unconnected with the existential drama of freedom, since it rather carries authoritarian connotations. And as such it can also be omitted from the Christological and eschatological depth of freedom and considered as something temporary, valid only within history and the ephemeral crystallizations of power contained in history.

Instead of conclusion: Extensions for the contemporary reflection

A final conclusive remark: In the context of the Neptic tradition, the question of freedom represents mainly the dialogical relationship of man with his nature and the divine meanings it carries. Nevertheless, in the context of modernity, the dialogue with historical institutions is also extremely important, so freedom is the ability to confront fossilized forms of power of the past critically and to change them, either through reflection or through the performativity of historical action. In this context, it is essential, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the founding of the Greek state, to reflect on the freedom that Dionysios Solomos praises, the freedom "born from the sacred bones of the Greeks". Could a similar political freedom, such as that provided by the Greek Revolution, have the characteristics as those of the neptic understanding of freedom we have set out? Can it be a freedom of the weak and the humble and not just a freedom as a power that simply replaces one power with another? We believe, first of all, that, by looking back to the memoirs of the 1821 combatants, we can trace a similar humble freedom, of trust and self-delivery of the meaning of history into the hands of God, a freedom not as a sovereign decision, but as a humble trust in the future. In this article we have tried to highlight some theological presuppositions of a similar non-authoritarian understanding of freedom, which in a modern context could also be considered in the contexts of history, institutions and politics.