

Nature, Person & Ascesis

An influential current of Orthodox thought has subtly undermined the teaching that nature is good. In so doing, it has also called into question the naturalness of ascetic striving. The patristic witness calls us to reclaim and embrace both nature and ascesis.

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Ascesis stands at the heart of spiritual life, a praxis both internal and external. Internal praxis is the struggle against the passions and the cultivation of virtues through prayer, study, and meditation. External praxis is the same struggle through bodily work, including vigil, fasting, abstinence, moderation, and works of love. Such training involves the human person in the cultivation of human nature, toward the goal of spiritual life. But what is the connection between person, nature (*physis*), and ascesis, and how are they related to the goal of spiritual life?

Let us first define our terms. Person is identified both with hypostasis and with the individual/atomon which means the undivided entity.¹ Person is nature with characteristic properties.² A person is distinguished from other hypostases by an incommunicable conflux of distinctive features: origin, matrix of relations, personal history, external form, memories, special gifts. It is the unique fusion of these properties that makes for personal otherness.³

Nature is understood as a complex of properties, which together make up the essence of a being, the 'common' that equally pertains to and substantially unites all beings of the same species, and the whole of created reality. It is the 'one' shared by the many and consisting of the many. The person is the one of the many who bears, manifests and shares in the common treasure. The person totally participates of the essence, and personal otherness is contemplated against the backdrop of the unity of nature.⁴

Most 'ordinary' people experience this reality naturally and more or less unconsciously. there is no question of confusing or severing personhood

from nature, or even seeking for a priority of one over the other. Yet in recent decades some Orthodox intellectuals (following and expanding on the assumptions of existentialist philosophy) have constructed a theology and ontology of personhood, which introduces a conflict between person and nature by placing the person before and above nature. This approach is usually called personalism and it is often presented by its devotees as the mark of Orthodoxy par excellence.

As a result of personalist theology's understanding of person and nature in opposition to one another, personalist theology has an uncomfortable relationship with the ascetic tradition. According to the version of personalism articulated by Christos Yannaras, ascetic struggle signifies the victory of the person over nature.⁵ The personalist theology of John Zizioulas, while similarly undervaluing nature pays scant attention at all to ascesis, focusing almost exclusively on the so-called 'communion of persons' and on the Eucharistic event as the end of spiritual life.⁶ Personalism views ascesis as at best a tool of liberation from nature and at worst a kind of add-on supplied by monastic culture and imposed on the church.

The main blunder of Orthodox personalism lies in its account of nature, which it couples with necessity.⁷ Nature is hereby colored with a tragic valence that cannot be transformed or redeemed. Opposed to this, high up in the clouds as it were, stands the authentic person, identified with love, freedom, grace, and being itself. For man to achieve true personhood he must escape, as it were, from his "gloomy mother". This is the ecstatic character of personhood, a liberation from the confines of nature alone to constitute the very being as communion. In a more refined version of personalism, indifferent nature must be led by the free person.⁸ Whatever the case may be, the person claims priority over nature, even ontological priority. Will, love and freedom are attributed to the person instead of nature.

Here a practical danger arises: does such a priority of person over nature permit the free person to define circumscribe -- even intervene in -- his or her own nature? Have the proponents of this teaching thought through its downstream consequences, especially in a cultural milieu like our own that is keen already to reject all biological claims in favour of the felt reality of personal feeling?

Having begun with these apprehensions, let us turn to the patristic approach to nature and its relation to ascesis.

The Holy Fathers never accepted an ontological association of nature with necessity. This is clear in their Trinitarian as well as Christological teaching.⁹ God's ontological freedom is not freedom from his own nature; God's freedom means that God is the sole self-subsisting and reigning uncreated reality, which is the fundamental law and principle of everything else. A personal will is not the *cause* either of divine essence or essential activities or persons – indeed the Divine Persons have no 'personal' will – and this does not in any way introduce a necessity to the uncreated Being.¹⁰

Furthermore, in the cosmic dimension, every being carries the *logos* of its essence. The omnipresence of Christ is the *logos*/intelligible principle of everything. This all-encompassing intelligibility is an act of Divine will instituting the natural condition, in accordance with which a creature participates in being. This is why nature can not lead us to what does not naturally exist.¹¹ Each particular *logos* is contained, from all eternity, in the divine *Logos*. He who was incarnate in the last times, is a Divine Fire present, as in the burning bush, in the being of everything that exists.¹² How can we say that such nature is wedded to a tragic necessity? And how can we identify freedom in contrast with nature?

Now, concerning humankind, can we say that real humanity is 'hypostatic' in being 'ekstatic', that is, free from its natural garb? Such an assumption is not corroborated by patristic testimony. In theology, whenever we say that God is love and light and goodness, we refer to essential and not personal attributes of God. Accordingly, in anthropology love and freedom are the quintessence of the endowment of human nature—created qualities calling for their perfection in the uncreated light of God's nature.

'There is no such thing in the world as evil irrespective of a deliberative will, and discoverable in a substance apart from that', says Gregory of Nyssa in his treatise 'On Virginity' (XII). 'Now the putting off of a strange accretion is equivalent to the return to that which is familiar and natural; and such a return cannot be but by again becoming that which in the beginning we were created. In fact, this likeness to the divine ... is the great gift of God bestowed upon our nature ... human efforts can only go so far as to clear away the filth of sin, and so cause the buried beauty of the soul to shine forth again.'¹³

We see that the concept of nature is a keystone in ascetic Orthodox spirituality and that the Fathers insist on the naturalness of spiritual life. As St Maximus explains, when the soul, contrary to nature, is impelled towards material things, the Saints resolve to redirect their impulses in accordance with nature towards God and to adapt their senses to God.¹⁴ Likeness to the divine, through the cultivation of virtues, is a gift bestowed upon human nature. It is a natural movement of ascent to our beginning.¹⁵ This is why the 'whole' or 'perfect' [ἄρτιος] human being is considered to be the one in whom the logos of nature is fulfilled.¹⁶ The beauty of the image is engrafted to human nature. This ancestral splendour was radiated by St. Anthony, when he emerged from his long ascetic struggle, filled with the Spirit of God and 'abiding in a natural state', as a model of what man was created to be.¹⁷ We are invited to accede to the design that is already intrinsic. In this broad picture asceticism is introduced as the means of supporting this natural ascent, through the removal of the obstacles of the passions and the crust of sin. In other words, asceticism aims for the re-shaping of ourselves into our original state, which is the beauty of the image.

The Creator 'incorporated in human nature the principles of all that is excellent', including the gift of free will. In its original, undefiled state, this is what the Fathers call 'natural will', the will that is common to all human beings, molded, as it were, from the one undivided nature. It is the spontaneous movement of the deepest heart towards good and God.¹⁸ When man finds and follows this natural will, he becomes simple, that is one with his fellow human beings, and one with his soul. The 'law of nature' directs to the one *logos* of nature. If the faculty of reason is not subject to carnal senses and will, the law of nature dictates love for those of the same nature. To those whose nature is crowned with reason, there will be one disposition, one ethos of life, one bond uniting all in communion, bringing them to the one logos of nature.¹⁹

And yet, if all good is a natural property, why does such a wide disparity of virtue appear among human beings?

St Maximus answers that disparity of virtue among human beings is due to the voluntary inequality in operating what belongs to 'good and beautiful' nature: for although virtues are natural things existing equally in all men, we do not practice what is natural to us to an equal degree²⁰. There are two pieces of information here: first, virtues exist in us not through asceticism, but by virtue of our creation. Second, the reason that we 'acquire' the

natural virtues – or rather, make them manifest – with labours is that man has to surpass an obstacle that springs up from his individuality and counterfeits the natural will. The perfect natural will can be transformed (or malformed), appropriated, and become 'personal'. In this way, a human being can use all his natural capacities against his very own nature through this kind of will. This is the 'gnomic' will, a kind of autonomous, self-directed will, the expression of the egocentric individual. It is 'the self-chosen impulse and movement of reason towards one thing or another', potentially separated and deviated from the 'natural movement of reasonable nature'.²¹ The gnostic will is what makes a person fragmented, dispersed to multiple and changing purposes, and separated from the rest of humanity.

This is why the gnostic will is the main target of ascetic enterprise. The ascetic act of suppressing willingly this egotistic will is the way to the 'essential person', the person that follows its nature.²²

Yet, how is evil engendered from within, springing up in the will? Does this not indicate a problem in created nature itself?

Nature, having risen in change from non-being to being,²³ carries the potential to return to the (logical) opposite of goodness, namely to the state of non-being. But evil has its origin in the activity on our part which opposes nature.²⁴

Because the human being has lost the sense of unity and integrity and has come to experience life in a way contrary to nature, the powers of our soul are fragmented and dispersed, and for this reason they produce a complicated and conflicted way of thinking and behaving, a painful diversity within the human being, expressed in the matrix of his relationships. The heart, the mind, the senses and the will are in a continuous punch-up. This is expressed dramatically by St Paul: "I see another law in my members. And I do what I would not...Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom 7:23-24) Our inner world becomes obscured, the mind confused, desire and anger gallop wherever they like, and the more complicated it becomes, the more we are afraid to touch it and cure it, thus becoming more extroverted and more insincere. Such is the way of Paul's man who "suffers another law in his members". However, Paul himself willed God in an absolute manner, without dividing his soul, so that he could say: 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me'. (Gal. 2:20).

That is why nothing abnormal, no ugliness or manifestation of evil, (violence, wars, injustice, inner and outer conflicts, various forms of death) diverts the Fathers' sight from man's royal origin and perspective.

Nevertheless, one may be baffled by a certain rhetoric of 'violence' over nature in monastic and patristic literature. Primarily, this is pedagogic. But we may proceed further to some qualifications. St John Damascene opines that the human being differs from non-rational beings by 'leading nature rather than being led by nature'.²⁵ This can be said because the term nature is subject to a double meaning: in its broader sense, nature is the essential ground of humanity and all human beings together. In its narrow sense, nature includes the specific laws that circumscribe the body as well as the lower (incensive and appetitive) part of the soul. It is in this narrow sense that the human being (more precisely, the intelligible or rational part of the soul) is called to lead nature and not to be led by it.

But we should also say that the term nature is often hijacked by personal whim. In literature, no more than in our daily experience, nature is often viewed as the power to whose alleged laws man's purpose and inventions are bound. In this case nature is used in the sense of each individual's nature—that is to say, the person, whose idiosyncrasy perceives, appropriates and uses what is universal. Accordingly, St Maximus says that human nature is bound to sin and decay only because of the personal *gnome*—the use (or rather misuse) of free choice.²⁶ In the long run such abuse of the inner volitional faculty fabricates a 'second', false nature (within us) that counterfeits the authentic one. This can be illustrated from the field of literature by the example of Edmund, one of the wicked figures in the tragedy of King Lear. This perverse young man invokes nature as his goddess, who stands up for bastards, and to whose laws his services are bound. But, in fact, it is his perverted will that creates its own nature and spreads destruction in the name of nature.

Therefore, if we use the terminology of 'violence' over nature in ascetic discourse, this is because we want to stress the fact that a human being can control or even surpass biological necessities, which are only one aspect of nature. Yet this violence, in the monastic experience, indicates rather the struggle against the gnomonic will. We exert violence upon some 'personal' aspects of our existence, so that we might be liberated from fragmentation, until we find the pure and stable nature, charged with love, looking towards her destiny.²⁷ This nature is disclosed through ascesis.

What the spiritual life seeks is 'pure nature' detached and liberated from the unnatural state of vicious passions²⁸ that kill and efface natural principles. As St Maximus asserts, in accordance with the principle or logos of being, passion and nature in no way coexist with each other.²⁹

Christian asceticism and spiritual life in general are entirely natural. So, according to St Basil, it is by nature that man brings his mind to bear upon the appetites, to channel thoughts and have control over emotions, and no less natural is the capacity for love.³⁰ Indeed, virginity, which becomes fertile in the case of the God-bearing Mother, is listed among 'nature's greatnesses', as a means to deification.³¹

This leads us on to the goal of spiritual life, which is to become 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:3-4) through the multiple and innumerable divine energies, the 'heavenly fire', which always remains in and out of the human being.³²

The identification of the human being with God takes place through likeness to the prototype, that is by the ongoing transformation of the very self, receiving, as much as possible, by grace the characteristics of Godliness (Phil 2:5; 1 Cor 2:16; Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:21). Participation in God's energy means participation in God's virtues: the One Wisdom, Righteousness, Love and Holiness.³³ It is the divine Logos who is 'the essence of all virtues'.³⁴ Thus, perfect virtues, as entailing properties of God's simple and uncompounded nature, make the human being a partaker of the divine simplicity and oneness.

This means that 'the human being exceeds his or her own nature, by becoming immortal from mortal, incorruptible from transitory, uncreated from ephemeral and, as a whole, God from man'.³⁵ Indeed, a kind of crossing of borders is demanded. Like the air which is capable of receiving the light but not of generating it, nature itself is not the source of grace.³⁶ Nature must be elevated to Christ, by Christ,³⁷ to become gold hammered 'in God's holy fire'. This is the widening and extension of nature in being enriched by and inflamed in the power of divinity. When through liturgy, prayer and ascesis, the three faculties of the soul – intelligence, incensive power and desire – are concentrated and unified around the divine simplicity, then soul and body, pervaded by the divine energy, are united in Spirit, and love uncreated arises.³⁸ Thus, in the power of virtues the soul

grows in likeness to God, leading its connatural body to the same deification and the unity of all creation in God's presence.³⁹

Now the role of each person is his synergy in the work of divine grace. It is a matter of response, sharing in and interacting with God's activity. But nowhere in patristic sources is there the slightest evidence of the belief that the grace of deification is personhood as transcending nature or as leading nature to its proper state.⁴⁰

We need to take seriously the dangers of the ontology of personhood. People are accustomed to say: love and freedom are generated from my person, I can do whatever I like with these. And this means nothing but I am free to love myself infinitely, and besides, I have the right to intervene, whenever I like, in my nature and, why not, in the nature of other people as well. We no longer understand what communion of nature means, we just live in personal relationships, or rather relationships of personal wills, among which, sooner or later, the most powerful shall prevail, control and dominate the others.

The need for the ascetic way is evident. Although we are separated from one another in place and time, characterized by delimitation, we are invited to follow our nature and the model of the divine Trinity. Since there is but one nature, there is one natural will.⁴¹ But while in the consubstantial Trinity the Persons are like reciprocally inherent torches, in other words, while in God the essential oneness is most perceptible, human beings are led to this common nature through love or, rather, through fostering the innate, natural power of loving.⁴² In order to find our fundamental unity within us, with the rest of our fellow human beings and with Divinity Itself, we need the discipline of prayer, training in humility and simplicity, and self-sacrificial acts. If we communicate through our energies, the more these energies are purified by the expulsion of the deficiencies of the personal will, the more our inclinations are joined to nature.

The ascetic way and the spirit of our times are starkly antithetical. Consumerism and narcissism have taken over our way of understanding everything. The world exists to serve our whims and desires, not excluding art, theology, and ritual. The empire of the ego brooks no constraint.

Nature and ascesis can save our person from this enslavement; for nature is the carrier of divine grace, and ascesis conforms the person to his or her

natural inclination to God and the good, receiving the unifying and deifying activity of the Spirit, and leaving ignorance and self-will behind.

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Notes

1. Gregory of Nyssa, *Ad Graecos*, gen. ed. W. Jaeger, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* [henceforth abbr. as GNO] III/ I. (Leiden: Brill, 1960–) pp. 23, 30–32. John of Damascus, *Philosophical Chapters*, ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* (Paris: 1857–66) [henceforth abbr. as PG] 43, 94.613B; *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 3.4, PG 94.997A.
2. Basil of Caesarea. ed. Y. Courtonne, *Lettres*, 3 vols. (Paris: 1957–66) Ep. 236, 6; Ep. 38.6. Maximus Confessor, Ep. 15, PG 91.557D.
3. Basil, Ep. 236, 6 ; Ep. 38.6. Maximus Confessor, Ep. 15, PG 91.557D.
4. Basil of Caesarea, *Against Eunomius II*, 28, PG 29.637; Basil (Gregory of Nyssa), Ep. 38.5. Maximus Confessor, Ep. 15, PG 91.552BC.
5. See Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology* (Bloomsbury: London, 1991) pp. 20–36.
6. See John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic 2006) pp. 18–19, 248; 35–36, 39; *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press: Crestwood, 1993) pp. 44, 87–88; 40–41.
7. *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 63, 224–5, 277; 24–25, n. 36.
8. John Zizioulas, 'Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor,' in *Knowing the Purpose of Creation through the Resurrection*, ed. Bishop Maxim Vasiljevic (Alhambra: Sebastian Press, 2013) pp. 85–113. For a critique see N. Loudovikos, "Dialogical Nature, Enousion Person, and Non-ecstatic Will in St Maximus the Confessor: The Conclusion of a Long Debate," *Analogia*, Vol. 2/1 (2017), pp. 79–110.
9. John of Damascus, *Exposition*, 3.14, PG 94.1041B. Maximus Confessor, *Pyrrho*, PG 91.293B–296A; *Ambigua*, PG 91.1272B–1272C. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius III*, 6, GNO, II, 192. Athanasius, *Against Arians III*, 66, PG

- 26.461C–464B; *On the Holy Spirit* III, 66, PG 26.461C–464C. For the Christological aspect see Maximus Confessor, *Pyrrho*, PG 91.289A–C.
10. Gregory of Nazianzus does not hesitate to say that it is absolutely impossible and inadmissible for God *not* to exist; clearly he does not see in this assertion any limitation of God's freedom. Gregory Nazianzen, *Fourth Theological Oration* (Or. 30) 11, PG 36.116C. Cyril of Alexandria, *The Book of Treasures*, VII, PG 75.84–85, 89, 96.
11. Maximus Confessor, *Various chapters*, V, 77, PG 90.1381A.
12. Gregory Nazianzen, *Hymn to God*, PG 37.507–508. Dionysius, *On the Celestial Hierarchy* IV, 1, PG 3.177D; *On Divine Names*, V, 8, PG 3.824C. Maximus Confessor, *To Thalassius*, 13, PG 90.296CD; *Various Chapters*, I, 71–72, PG 90.1208C; *Ambigua*, PG 91.1077C–1081B, 1148D; *On Theology and the Economy*, I, 47, PG 90.1100BC.
13. Gregory of Nyssa, *GNO VIII/I, Ascetica*, 298–300.
14. Maximus Confessor, *Various Chapters*, 73, PG 90.1377C–1380A.
15. Gregory of Nyssa *GNO VIII/I, Ascetica*, 298–300.
16. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Ecclesiastes*, Hom. VI, GNO V, 380; Hom. VII, GNO V, 411.
17. See PG 26.864B–865A.
18. Maximus Confessor, *To Marinus*, PG 91.276C.
19. Maximus Confessor, *To Thalassius*, 64, PG.724C–725A.
20. Maximus Confessor, *Pyrrho*, PG 91.309BC.
21. See Maximus Confessor, *To Marinus*, PG 91.53C, 56AB, 24B, 32C, 153AB, 196C–197A, 192BC, 280A; *Pyrrho*, PG 91.308CD.
22. Maximus Confessor, *Various Chapters*, I, 46, PG 90.1196BC.
23. Gregory of Nyssa, ed. J.H. Srawley, *The Catechetical Oration*. (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1956) 6, p. 34.
24. Maximus Confessor, *Various Chapters*, IV, 33, PG 90.1317C; III, 57, PG 90.1285B; *To Thalassius*, 42, PG 90.405C. For Maximus nature has been devastated by sin, but nothing points to the fact that this course is a part of its very definition. *Ibid.*, 47, PG 90.424B; 64, PG 90.696D–700C. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Catechetical Oration*, 5, pp. 27–28.
25. John of Damascus, *Exposition*, 2.27, PG 94.960D–961A.
26. *To Thalassius*, 21, PG 90.312B–317A.
27. Maximus Confessor, *Ambigua*, PG 91.1117AB; *Pyrrho*, PG 91.309B–312A.
28. Macarius, Hom. 4, 1, *Die 50 Geistlichen Homilien*, p. 26.
29. Maximus Confessor, *Various Chapters*, V, 28, PG 90.1357D.
30. Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea*, Berkeley, 1994, pp. 221–2. Basil of Caesarea, *Give Heed to Thyself*, 1, PG 31.197CD; *Longer Rules*, 3, PG 31.917A; In

Time of Famine and Drought, PG 31.325A; *On Envy*, PG 31.384B.

31. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, GNO VIII/I, 1, p. 252.

32. Macarius, Hom. 40, 7, ed. H. Dörries, E. Klostermann, and M. Kroeger, *Die 50 Geistlichen Homilien*. (PTS 4: Berlin 1964) σ. 278-9. It is the 'movement' or radiance of the divine essence *ad extra*. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius I*, GNO I, pp. 87-88. Anastasius the Sinaite, ed. F. Diekamp, *Doctrina Patrum de Incarnatione Verbi*. (Muenster, 1907.) p. 90. Basil of Caesarea, *Against Eunomius II*, 28, PG 29.637. Gregory of Nyssa, *To Eustathius*, GNO III/I, pp. 14-15.

33. Maximus Confessor, *To Thalassius*, 59, PG 90.608D-609A; *On Theology and the Economy*, II, 21, PG 90.1133D. Maximus Confessor, *Mystagogy*, 5, PG 91.676A.

34. Maximus Confessor, *Ambigua*, PG 91.1081D-1084A.

35. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Beatitudes*, 7, GNO VII/II, p. 151; *On the Song of Songs*, 6, GNO VI, 176-9. Also, Dionysius, *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy I*, 3, PG 3.376A. Maximus Confessor, *Various chapters*, I, 42, PG 90.1193D.

36. Macarius, Hom. 1, 11. Maximus Confessor, *To Thalassius*, 22, PG 90.321A; 59, 604B-609C; *Ambigua*, PG 91.1237AB. Jean Scot (Eriugena), ed. & tr. Édouard Jeuneau, *Homélie sur le Prologue de Jean*. (Éditions du Cerf: Paris, 1969) XIII; *Periphyseon. On the Division of Nature*, tr. Myra I. Uhlfelder. (Indianapolis : Bobbs-Merrill, 1976) I.

37. Maximus Confessor, *Various Chapters*, I, 72-73, PG 90.1208C-1209A; IV, 16, 1309D; *Ambigua*, PG 91.1048D-1049B.

38. Maximus Confessor, *Various Chapters*, III, 55, PG 90.1284C; II, 72, 1248AB. For the deification of the entire person through the virtues see *Ambigua*, PG 91.1248A-1249C.

39. Maximus Confessor, *Ambigua*, PG 91.1092BC, 1108C, 1112C-1116A; *To Thalassius*, 8, PG 90.285A; *On Theology and the Economy*, II, 21, PG 90.1133D; *Various chapters*, III, 46, PG 90.1280C; *Mystagogy*, 5, PG 91.676A.

40. Maximus Confessor, *Ambigua*, PG 91.1328-1329; *To Thalassius*, 65, PG 90.744B, 776C.

41. John of Damascus, *Exposition*, 2.22, PG 94.948AB.

42. Basil of Caesarea, *Longer Rules*, 2.1, PG 31.909AB.