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Pascal Mueller-Jourdan

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The Architecture of the Cosmos

St Maximus the Confessor
New Perspectives

Edited by
Antoine Lévy, Pauli Annala,
Olli Hallamaa and Tuomo Lankila

with the collaboration of
Diana Kaley



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TÖRÖNEN, Melchisedec

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The Metaphysical Position of the Divine as 'Desirable' in Proclus' *Platonic Theology* and Maximus Confessor's Thought

PASCAL MUELLER-JOURDAN

Introduction

The present research originated in the difficulties in reading some philosophical digressions in Maximus Confessor's and his *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* attempts to solve ambiguities in some obscure passages of the Holy Scriptures. I would like to focus particularly on the digression in *Ad Thalassium* 59 where he deals with the problem of the correct interpretation of the First Letter of Peter, chapter 1, 10–11. Maximus offers a concatenation of definitions, in a very singular way, typical of the style of his polemical works. In one of those definitions, the Byzantine Monk says:

Repletion of desire is the evermoving rest around the desirable of the ones who desire (ἐφέσεως δὲ πλήρωσις ἐστὶν ἢ περὶ τὸ ἐφετὸν τῶν ἐφιεμένων ἀεικίνητος στάσις) evermoving rest is the continuous and never-ending enjoyment of the desirable (ἀεικίνητος δὲ στάσις ἐστὶν ἢ τοῦ ἐφετοῦ διηλεκτῆς τε καὶ ἀδιάστατος ἀπόλαυσις).¹

Such a definition seems to be original, at least in late antique Christian theology. Methodologically, it implies the necessity to make a detour through philosophical materials to evaluate the origin and the general context of this topic.

¹ *Q. Thal* 59, 130–133.

In fact, as I shall propose in this particular case, the source of Maximus is Neoplatonism. I shall first examine what the divine, qualified by the term 'desirable', means in the theology of Proclus of Lycia, who was one of the most famous teachers of the Academy in Late Antiquity. As we shall see, the 'desirable' is part of the triadic system of Proclus and, more precisely, part of the triad of the Good which is the most elevated triad for the teacher of Athens. We shall try to understand what Proclus means by the 'desirable', and the necessity to position the 'desirable' topographically in an explanatory scheme of all realities. We shall note that such a scheme expresses the divine action as much as the good disposition of all levels of the reality.

Secondly, I will examine places where Maximus himself uses the same scheme and then seek in which sense it is possible to understand, in his theological view, what such a scheme, and such a centre (ultimately, what the divine as 'desirable') could mean.

*The Divine as 'Desirable' in the Proclean Triadic System :
the Case of the Platonic Theology*

The term 'desirable' appears in several places in Proclus' works, but it is in the first book of the *Platonic Theology* that Proclus reveals, in the clearest way, what the status of the divine as 'desirable' is. For Proclus, the 'desirable' is the highest attribute of the divine triad of the Good.

In Book 1, chapter 22, we note that the 'desirable' (τὸ ἐφειτόν) is a part, and certainly the preeminent part, of the triad of the Good.² There are three elements, also named 'causes' by Proclus, which make up this triad, as the expression of the triadic activity or energy of the absolute transcendent One.³ The 'desirable' (τὸ ἐφειτόν) is the source of the triad of the Good, the 'sufficient' (τὸ ἰκανόν) is the limitless generative power of the divine Goodness, and the 'perfect' (τὸ τέλειον) is the limit which keeps, 'out of an unlimited extension', the expansive power of the generative Goodness. Proclus also considers the perfect as a cause mingled from the two others

² PROCLUS, *Th.Pl.*, 102.

³ PROCLUS, *Th.Pl.*, 101, 14; 104, 16.

causes, the source and the generative power.⁴ Applied to the geometrical scheme of the circle, the 'desirable' represents the centre, the 'sufficient' the radii or the straight lines from the centre, and the 'perfect' is the circumference, or the outer limit containing the infinite power expressed by the straight lines.

But, what does Proclus say about the meaning of such a scheme in his theological project? First, it appears to reveal the presence of the Goodness of the gods, inherent in all divine, intellectual, psychic, and physical levels of reality. Second, it seems to reveal the transcendent 'ordo rerum' which needs to be achieved at all lower degrees of beings. 'Inherent mode of presence and transcendent order' could summarise, I think, the main elements in Proclus' schema of the relationship between the divine Goodness as cause and its beneficiaries.

In the section where Proclus describes the characteristics of the 'desirable', we find two substantives grammatically related to each other : τὸ ἐφειτόν and τὰ ὄντα. The latter is also written as : πάντα τὰ ὄντα (all the beings). Such a generalization encompasses the order of all things, from the gods to prime matter.

The section begins from: "But if it be requisite summarily to unfold the characteristic peculiarity of the desirable", and it ends with: "such therefore is the desirable".⁵

Proclus opens the discussion stating the necessity to put aside the use of such a word in the context of the sensible as much as the intelligible. The 'desirable' of the Proclean triad does not have to be assimilated to an object of appetite (ὀρεκτόν) in the sensible, nor assimilated to an intellectual object, because the 'desirable' – I quote Proclus – "...is ineffable, and prior to all knowledge extends to all beings".⁶ 'Prior' (translating the Greek preposition πρό) simply reveals the first sign of a particular characteristic of the 'desirable'. And 'prior' in the Proclean system means topographically 'high', or 'before' in a metaphysical sense, or at the highest degree or rank, containing and being contained by that which is proceeding from it. What is 'prior' in such a system is absolutely free of that which is located at a lower level of reality.

⁴ PROCLUS, *Th.Pl.*, 104, 8–9.

⁵ PROCLUS, *Th.Pl.*, 102, 1; 102, 27.

⁶ PROCLUS, *Th.Pl.*, 101, 25–27.

Next, Proclus discusses the nature of the 'desirable' by means of a comparison between the 'supplier of light' – most probably the sun – and the 'desirable' of the gods. Being prior, the sun and the 'desirable' in the triad of the Good both proceed into secondary nature and convert them to themselves.

The sun, as much as the 'desirable', possess an active power. The parallel is obvious. The sun provides light, illumination, and it is transformative. It communicates its proper form and the eye – depending on its receptive capacity – becomes 'solar-form' (ἡλιοειδής). But there is also a limitation, because sameness is at the same time otherness. Proclus uses here, in a causal sense (by the preposition διὰ), a very significant 'hapax legomenon': the substantive ἕτερομοιότης.⁷ The word is translated by Taylor as 'a different similitude', Liddell-Scott suggests 'identity in diversity'. This important limitation is also applied to things moved by, and moving, around the 'desirable'. According to Proclus, the 'desirable' "by its unknown transcendence which surpasses the whole of things ... preserves its proper union unmingled (ἄμικτον) with secondary natures".⁸ This 'out of confusion' state preserves a metaphysical distance between the sun and the eye which becomes 'solar-form'. Similarly, all the beings affected by the permanent and the transcendent presence of the 'desirable' become 'boni-form' (ἀγαθοειδής), but don't become Goodness itself. Proclus would certainly agree with such an interpretation. As we read in Proposition 8 of the *Elements of Theology*, the Lycian says: "For if all things which exist desire their good, it is evident that the primal Good is beyond the things which exist. For if it be identified with any existent thing, then an existent thing is identical with the Good, and by this identity excluded from desiring the Good".¹⁰ Commenting on this proposition 8, Dodds notes: "Desire is, like causality, a transitive relation between substantives – τὸ ἐφιέμενον can never be identical with τὸ ἐπετόν".¹¹ Having considered both 'the desirable' and 'that which is desiring', we now briefly explain their respective positions and their proper activities.

⁷ PROCLUS, *Th.Pl.*, 102, 5.

⁸ PROCLUS, *Th.Pl.*, 102.25–26.

⁹ See PROCLUS, *Th.Pl.*, 103, 1.

¹⁰ PROCLUS, *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 8, 31–34.

¹¹ DODDS 1963, 195.

The character of the 'desirable' is expressed in both its position and its action. The definite position of the Good as 'desirable' is, in every case, a position relative to something, and its action is obviously a transitive action exerted upon something. Likewise, Proclus describes both the position and the action of all beings. Topographic position and action are both predominant here.

The first important characteristic of the 'desirable' is its action upon all things. It allures and draws upward, it exerts a centripetal force upon all things.

The second characteristic, Proclus says, is the position of the 'desirable' relative to all things: (1) everywhere present to..., and (2) not deserting any order whatever of beings.¹² Here Proclus even mentions the case of the matter which is also said to be extended to the 'desirable'. Aristotle expressed a similar idea in the first Book of *Physics*. But there the matter was desiring or aspiring to physical form.¹³ For Proclus, present to... and not deserting any order of beings... does not mean that the 'desirable' is a part of..., or confused with..., or entering in composition with, or further, being grasped by... something, whatever it is.

Since the primal Good is absolutely 'out of time', it is always what it is, and thus it must be always 'desirable'. Therefore, its status as 'desirable' must necessarily be permanent. For this reason, the desire which fulfills all things can never end. Thus, such a state is not a transitory state but a permanent one, as Proclus says: "desire of things is inextinguishable" (ἄσβεστός).¹⁴ The desire affects all things by a sort of polar attraction as a natural tendency to be oriented in a vital and essential direction. Proclus says that the 'desirable' is the centre around which all beings and even the gods have their essence, power and energy.¹⁵ Such a position of the 'desirable', a position concerning all things past, present and future, corresponds to a salutary, providential and so divine disposition.

However, in contrast with the stable state of the 'desirable' as center, all things seem to be affected by movement as Proclus says: "Not being able therefore either to know or receive that which they desire, they dance

¹² Proclus, *Th.Pl.*, 102, .8–9 (tr. Taylor).

¹³ ARISTOTELES, *Phys.* 1, 9 (192a13–25).

¹⁴ PROCLUS, *Th.Pl.*, 102, 15.

¹⁵ Cf. PROCLUS, *Th.Pl.*, 102, 13–15.

round it (περὶ αὐτὸ πάντα χορεύει), and are parturient and as it were prophetic with respect to it".¹⁶

The convergence of the power of desire universally extended to all levels of reality plus the ungraspable nature of the 'desirable', certainly explains the metaphysical dance as a permanent circular movement around the source of all realities. Such a metaphor becomes a strong topic in late Neoplatonism, both pagan and Christian. The dance expresses a transcendental 'well-disposed' situation, even if it is possible for things to turn away, in a paradoxical unnatural existence.

Beings seem to have by nature a mobile existence. We could say that movement is a particular characteristic of their nature. For them, moving is being and being is necessarily being in movement. That would mean that a radical state of rest for beings, whatever they are, would paradoxically approach a state of non-being.

Conclusion of the First Part

The 'desirable' is the centre of all existing things. Beyond the metaphor of the geometrical figure, it must be considered the source, not only of the essence (οὐσία), the power (δύναμις) and the energy (ἐνέργεια) of all things, but also the source of their well-being. It is moving them, and moving them around itself. Clearly such a movement is stable. Being stable, it is at rest and, thus, it is not only a well-ordered position of things but a permanent ever-well-ordered disposition of all things.

At the metaphysical level of the providential triad of the Good, such a perspective seems to express the reality. But at the level of the sensible world which is in the coming-to-be, which always seems balanced between being and non-being, between generation and corruption, such a perspective seems idealistic, even if, for Proclus, the 'desirable' is the stable seat of all existing things,¹⁷ both intelligible and sensible.

However, the possibility of an ever-well-being around the 'desirable' has an interesting parallel with Maximus Confessor's explanation of the providential action of God.

¹⁶ Cf. PLATON, *Res publica* VI (490b); PROCLUS, *Th.Pl.*, 102, 17-18.

¹⁷ Cf. *Th.Pl.*, 104, 13.

The circle and the 'desirable' as a centre in Maximus Confessor's thought

Before assessing the status of the 'desirable' as the geometrical centre in Maximus Confessor's metaphysics, and the possible action of (i.e. the role played by) such a centre, I have to stress the limit of my inquiry because I have only found one single occurrence of this word in his writings.

The word occurs in *Ad Thalassium* 59, in a philosophical digression in which Maximus uses a very characteristic method of definitions.

Repletion of desire is the evermoving rest around the desirable of the ones who desire (ἐφέσεως δὲ πλήρωσις ἐστὶν ἢ περὶ τὸ ἐφετὸν τῶν ἐφιειμένων ἀεικίνητος στάσις) evermoving rest is the continuous and never-ending enjoyment of the desirable (ἀεικίνητος δὲ στάσις ἐστὶν ἢ τοῦ ἐφετοῦ διηνεκῆς τε καὶ ἀδιάστατος ἀπόλαυσις).¹⁸

A single word, appearing just twice in the same sentence, may not seem sufficient reason for a comparison with the Proclian triad of the Good, but the context in which this single word appears, and the recurrence of the geometrical scheme in Maximus' thought certainly argue the presence of a strong Neoplatonic bent in Maximus Confessor's system.

We observe at least three times in the works of Maximus the occurrence of the geometrical figure which is omnipresent in Neoplatonism:

1. in the second Book of the *Hundred Chapters on theology and the economy in the flesh of the son of God*, chapter 4, Book 2,
2. in the seventh Book of the *Ambiguorum Liber* (see below),
3. in the *Mystagogy*, chapter 1, applied to Christ (see below).

The figure is particularly significant in the last two places. In the *Ambiguorum Liber* 7, trying to fight the hardening of the doctrine of Origenes in the Palestinian monastic tradition of the sixth century, Maximus proposes a sort of triadic explanatory model of all realities, based on a procession/reversion model, which is schematically quite close to the triad of the Good we have seen in the *Platonic Theology* of Proclus.

¹⁸ *Q.Thal.* 59, 130-133.

Maximus says:

We are speechless before the sublime teaching about the Logos, for he cannot be expressed in words or conceived in thought. Although he is beyond being and nothing can participate in him in any way, nor is he any of the totality of things that can be known in relation to other things, nevertheless we affirm that the one Logos is many *logoi* and the many *logoi* are One. Because the One goes forth out of *goodness* (my emphasis) into individual beings, creating and preserving them, the One is many. Moreover the many are directed toward the One and are providentially guided in that direction. It is as though they were drawn to an all-powerful centre (my emphasis) that had built into it the beginnings of the lines that go out from it and that gathers them all together. In this way the many are one.¹⁹

As in the Proclian figure of the circle, Maximus describes a centre, lines, and a providential containment of the process, so an outer limit containing the infinite generative power of the Logos-One.

I suggest that such a scheme is a paradigmatic expression of permanent relations 'out of spātial and temporal' categories. This scheme is inextended at the metaphysical level of the Logos. At the level of the physical, or tridimensional extension, thus at the level of the *logoi* enmattered, concretely realised in concrete creatures (i.e. in sensible beings), such a scheme is on the contrary expressed in space and time. Not extended there (i.e. in the Logos-One), the *logoi* acquire extension and visibility here. A major aspect of this extension is formulated in a very interesting explanatory scheme in *Ambiguorum Liber* 10²⁰ which confirms the dialectic 'inextended/extended' in the Maximian system as well in the Neoplatonist one. In *Ambiguorum Liber* 10, Maximus describes in a very Porphyrian manner a sort of scale of beings appearing by the movement of expansion (ἡ διαστολή) and the inverted movement of contraction (ἡ συστολή). Maximus inherits here the Neoplatonic theory of a sort of permanent substructure of all things. This version of the Tree of Porphyry realised at the level of the sensible beings is,

¹⁹ *Amb.Io.* 7, 1081bc (tr. Wilken, 57–58).

²⁰ *Amb.Io.* 10, 1177b–1180a.

for Maximus, the extensional structure of things preexisting in God under the uniformity of the Logos-One.

We can assume that there are no *logoi* without the generative power of the Goodness of the Logos. And if the *logoi* of the things are inextended at the level of the Logos-One, they have extensional determinations at the level of the sensible universe. Therefore, the beings produced by such a power are naturally affected by movement, either linear or circular, or mixed. The movement is constitutive of their good nature and their nature is good because the beings come from the goodness of the Logos-One. Such a Neoplatonic topic is surprisingly helpful in going beyond the doctrine of Origenes' pre-existing rational creatures who fall after they have been paradoxically disgusted by the monotony of their initial, and pre-existing, and pre-corporeal, divine life. If the paradigmatic relation Logos-One/many-*logoi* is in God inextended, when God creates, He creates all things – according to their uniformly pre-existing *logoi* – in extension, by moving them in a determined space-time.

However, in the extended sensible world – in Maximus' system – movement appears to be predominantly affected by linearity, and thus by some impermanence which seems to consist in a continual transit from non-being to being, and from being to non-being.

In chapter 23 of the *Mystagogy*, Maximus seems to clearly admit such a problem when he writes: "On the basis of this appearance of things there has developed a perpetual war of these things with each other to the mutual destruction of all since everything is destroying each other and being destroyed in each other, and the only result is that they are unstable and perish and are never able to meet each other in a tranquil and secure situation".²¹ Such a theme is well attested in Maximus' thought, but the cause of the perpetual war does not always appear so evident and anyway all things, whatever they are, seem to be now in a need of salvation, for they seem to be predominantly affected by corruption.

However, for Maximus, in God, or, now in the Church as a new creation, things appear in their well-being, or perhaps acquire well-being, their ever-well-being according to their own logos in God, and so acquire a necessary stability, that seems deficient in the current situation of natural

²¹ *Myst.* 23, 793–798 (tr. Berthold).

objects. And it is so because, for Maximus, the Church is metaphysically, or spiritually speaking, the *Corpus Christi*, the Body of the Logos made flesh, i.e. the Body of the Logos made visible, or the Logos revealed in the three-dimensional extension of the sensible world. Accordingly, the Church seems to reveal the providential disposition of God toward creatures and give testimony to a well-disposed intramundane order of all realities. This Maximian typology introduces the figure of the circle, applied to Christ as the Head of the Church who is topographically associated with the Logos-centre of *Ambiguorum Liber* 7 (see supra).

In the first chapter of the *Mystagogy*, Maximus wrote:

It is he <Christ> encloses in himself all beings by the unique, simple, and infinitely wise power of his goodness. As the centre of straight lines that radiate from him he does not allow by his unique, simple, and single cause and power that the principles of beings become disjoined at the periphery but rather he circumscribes their extension in a circle and brings back to himself the distinctive elements of beings which he himself brought into existence. The purpose of this is that the creations and products of the one God be in no way strangers and enemies to one another by having no reason or centre around which (περὶ τὸ καὶ ὅπου) they might show each other any friendly or peaceful sentiment or identity, and not run the risk of having their being separated from God to dissolve into non-being".²²

Christ as centre seems to reintroduce to the sensible world the divine design of the permanent, transcendent and stable relation between the Logos and the *logoi*, and so the permanent good disposition between the *logoi* themselves, by reason of each of them being related to the Logos-one. This recovered relation in sensibles fixes all the things in being in protecting them from dissolving into non-being.

²² *Myst.* 1, 187–198 (tr. Berthold, slightly modified).

Conclusion

Considering the examples I have discussed above, we can admit the transversality of the geometrical scheme of the circle in the ways Maximus describes the multiplex web of all realities. For instance:

- describing the relation between the pre-existing Logos and the *logoi* in God (*Amb.Io.* 7),
- describing the dynamic, but stable structure of all beings proceeding from the first cause, once all things have been created (*Amb.Io.* 10),
- describing the mission of the Logos made flesh, the Christ Jesus, and his central position as the Head of the Church, which plays, in this system, a salvatory role (*Myst.* 1),
- and finally, in *Ad. Thal* 59, describing what the Prophets – by the means of the Holy Spirit – were led to see of the eschatological *mysterium salutis* long before the Incarnation and the accomplishment of the eternal and divine purpose concerning all creatures. What they saw was nothing else but the eternal Providence and Goodness of God towards His creatures and the definitive ever-well-being of all creatures at the end of times (i.e. at a post-historical level).

The perpetual ever-moving rest around the 'desirable' in *Ad Thalassium* 59 – without any doubt – reproduces the same scenography (i.e. the same topography, the same movement and the same rest) as the metaphysical dance of all beings inextinguishably affected by the desire of the Good, described by Proclus in the explanation of the triad of the Good in the *Platonic Theology*.

For Maximus himself, the eschatological scheme in which the 'desirable' comes into sight transcends all times because the 'desirable' expresses the permanent and perpetual state of the divine Goodness. For that reason, even if Maximus places the 'desirable' in eschatological time, it necessarily precedes all beings and so must be beyond time, and even if that Goodness as 'desirable' will be definitively revealed – from our temporal point of view – at the end of time. The end of time corresponds – for Maximus – to the repletion of desire. Characterized by permanent repletion, this desire is not desire for second level, but desire for the absolute transcendent Good.

It is, for all creatures, a desire at the highest and definitive degree. The desire for the 'desirable' for those who desire the divine Good must be continuous, because the Good just can't be Good once – and so 'desirable' – and not Good at some other time, because it is always what it is. For that reason, the movement of attraction provoked by the desire for the Good must be permanent and stabilised at rest. This is certainly the meaning of the expression 'evermoving rest' used by Maximus to describe the final state of all beings. As in Proclus' thought, in Maximus' thought there is a single one 'desirable' that we can call God, Good, One, Centre and so on.

Final Remarks

A definitive conclusion seems impossible until we have a more detailed comparison between the lexicon used by Maximus to describe the final state of creatures in the digression in *Ad Thalassium* 59 and the technical data of the Proclean system which is beyond the scope of this contribution. Systematic research on the complete digression of the *Ad Thalassium* 59 would inform future studies of Maximus' Neoplatonic sources.

The triadic substructure of the geometrical scheme clearly present in Maximus Confessor's thought as well as in Proclus' system expresses the triadic energy and/ or activity of the first, but unknown and unparticipated, principle, source and seat of all realities.

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Γωνία: Looking into the Corners of St Maximus' Cosmic Architecture

ANTOINE LÉVY, OP

I find one of Nietzsche's main insights fairly convincing. It claims that what Jews brought to the world is the dimension of meaning. How does the derisory narrative of our existence fit into some all-mighty transcendent Thought located beyond or behind this world? This is the Jewish question. I believe Nietzsche was also entitled to contrast this Jewish dimension with the Greek approach to the cosmos. The principle that guides the work of the Moirai as they weave the destiny of men and gods is not an intelligible end; it is a vertiginous blind spot. Meanwhile, the dimension of meaning leaves the Greek question completely untouched; namely, what makes the world what it is? What are the natural principles that can account for the order of the universe? This being said, a contrast does not imply some intrinsic incompatibility. Here I would allow myself to depart from the Nietzschean *Weltanschauung*. The idea that there is a point where the Jewish dimension of Meaning and the Greek inquiry about Nature are destined to meet is, I would contend, integral to Maximus' insight regarding the ultimate structure of the cosmos.

When I evoke the Jewish horizon in relationship to Maximus, this is much more than a manner of paying tribute to his familiarity with the Old Testament. Several passages in his writings scolding Judaism as a religion combined with an excessive attention to the prodromes of the Palamite doctrine – *mea maxima culpa* indeed! – have led the overwhelming majority of Maximus scholars to keep on presenting him as some sort of prototype of the Greek-Byzantine genius. However, I wonder what other theologian of the same tradition has so consistently