

## VITA PRACTICA: ΦΡΟΝΗΣΙΣ AND ST. MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR

### **Abstract**

*As a continuation of Aristotle's definition of φρόνησις as a virtue by which the individual is competent in each individual case to find the optimal choice for action that in the background has the general picture of an eudaimonic life, in a specific medieval context, φρόνησις is treated also in the philosophy of St. Maximus the Confessor. According to St. Maximus the Confessor, φρόνησις is an understanding of practical matters that are related to active life, namely "the deliberative power that determines the right use of reason for those engaged in practice" (Amb Io. 1109B).*

*In this text, the concept φρόνησις in the works of St. Maximus the Confessor through several aspects will be examined: creation as an expression of the Divine φρόνησις, φρόνησις within the systems of virtues and its function, φρόνησις as the basis for vita practica and the relation between vita practica and vita contemplativa. Through these thematic points, the characteristics of φρόνησις in St. Maximus Confessor's works will be drawn, which will show his aspirations for reconciliation of microcosmic antinomies with the macrocosmic paradigm of the eternal Logos.*

**Keywords:** ST. MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, ΦΡΟΝΗΣΙΣ, VITA PRACTICA, VITA CONTEMPLATIVA

### **Introduction**

The classical pattern of the division of virtues (so-called cardinal virtues, courage - ἀνδρεία, moderation - σωφροσύνη, justice - δικαιοσύνη and prudence - φρόνησις), originating from antiquity, especially present in Stoicism and Neoplatonism, is almost without hesitation accepted by many of the medieval authors, both in the Western and in the Byzantine tradition. In the Middle Ages, the cardinal virtues were not suppressed by ethical concepts with dominant theological context, but on the contrary, they were fully integrated into Christian ethical thought (Bejczy, 2011, 1). Acceptance of this pattern can be noticed in the Byzantine philosophical tradition.

An explicit acceptance of the classical cardinal virtues, in addition to the purely Christian virtues,<sup>1</sup> can be observed in the writings of St. Maximus the Confessor. The definition of the four cardinal virtues in his works very often correlates with the definition of the four cardinal vices (γενικαὶ κακίαι) - folly, cowardice, intemperance and injustice (*De Char.* 2, 79). St. Maximus the Confessor, with a quotation from The First Epistle to the Corinthians (1 *Cor.* 15, 49), points out their importance, indicating that the one who possesses these virtues possesses the "image of the man of heaven".

According to St. Maximus the Confessor, the Christian guides his life within these three things: the commandments, the doctrine and the faith: "the commandments separate the mind from the passions, doctrine introduces it the knowledge of the creatures, faith brings it to the contemplation of the Holy Trinity" (*De Char.* 4. 47). This division of Christian life can be seen as a theory of a threefold spiritual development: the first degree is the "practical philosophy", which is the basis for the *vita practica*, the second is "natural philosophy", which is the basis for the *vita contemplativa*, and the third is "theological philosophy", which is the basis for the *vita mystica*.

St. Maximus the Confessor primarily sees the foundation for the union with God in action because, quoting James (*Jm.* 2: 20), he believes that "Faith without works is dead". He writes: "No reasonable person would ever presume to say that anything dead or without activity should be counted among the finer things" (*Myst.* 5). He is not an advocate of the sole fide thesis, because the search for God cannot be started without action (*Q. Thal.* 48). If both faith and deeds are present at the same time, a human person can be transformed. The most important virtue whose possession is prerequisite for *vita practica*, is φρόνησις.

Prudence or φρόνησις is a concept whose more systematic and paradigmatic elaboration we read in Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics". Φρόνησις is a disposition "to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself [φρόνιμος, J.P.], not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general" (*NE* 1140a23-27). In this sense, φρόνησις according to Aristotle, is the intellectual, deliberative virtue, which as a rational disposition is a prerequisite and a complement to the moral virtues arising from the appetitive part of the soul, such as righteousness, friendship, moderation. Φρόνησις is a virtue by which the individual is capable in each individual case to find the optimal choice for action that in the background has the general picture of a happy, eudaimonic life, the ultimate goal of human action according to Aristotle.

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<sup>1</sup> Faith, fear of God, self-mastery, patience, long-suffering, hope in God, detachment and charity (*De Char.* 1. 2-3.) See Thunberg, 1995, 284-331 on the influence of the Evagrius Ponticus' virtue system on St. Maxim the Confessor's system of virtues.

Aristotle's conceptual inheritance according to which intellectual virtues belong to two spheres, one to active and practical life, and another to life devoted to eternal truths, can be traced also in the works of St. Maximus the Confessor. According to St. Maximus, φρόνησις is an understanding of practical matters that are related to active life, namely "the deliberative power that determines the right use of reason for those engaged in practice" (*Amb Io.* 1109B). He opposes φρόνησις to man's irascible and concupiscible actions, representing a capacity for discernment of virtue of the vice (*De Char.* 2.26).

The concept of φρόνησις in St. Maximus' philosophy in many respects resembles Aristotle's. Below we will see the conceptualization of φρόνησις and its specificity in the philosophy of St. Maximus the Confessor.

### Creation as an expression of the Divine φρόνησις

The connection between the ontology and anthropology in St. Maximus the Confessor can be found elsewhere in his writings, starting from the point of view that the act of creating the world is conceived as a creating a home of man (Гулевска, 2010, 24). Following this connection, apart from mentioning φρόνησις at the places in St. Maximus' works where he deals with purely ethical issues, mentions of φρόνησις can be found also in places that deal with an ontological and cosmological issues, especially in "Ambigua to John". Here St. Maximus describes the created cosmos as a divinely established, ontologically interconnected structure of particulars, species and genera which are connected in accordance with the logoi. The cosmos represents a unity whose constituents are wholes of other constituents, and those of thirds, etc., ending the whole-part levels with the degree of particular beings that are only parts. According to him, the principle of this arrangement is Christ, the Logos, who through the power of σοφία holds the unity of the creatures, and φρόνησις embraces their constituent parts. "He is by nature the Creator and Provider of all things, and through Himself draws into one those that are separated, dissolving strife among beings, and binding together *all things* in peaceful friendship and undivided concord..." (*Amb. Io.* 1313C). In this sense, the actual world is an expression of God's φρόνησις. Due to St. Maximus' apophatic line, from man's point of view, there is no sense in trying to understand the causes of God's creation. He needs to believe in His φρόνησις by which this complex world is created.

Considering the cosmological aspect of φρόνησις in St. Maximus, two pairs of correlative notions that can be seen later in the concept of human φρόνησις, should be pointed out: σοφία -generality/unity and φρόνησις-particularity. Through φρόνησις, the Logos permeates into the particular things and unites them according to their unity. The direction of φρόνησις towards the created complex world (1), its separation from the wisdom that

brings the unity (2) and the permeating into the created through the general (3) are the characteristics that the macrocosmic φρόνησις shares with the microcosmic-human φρόνησις.

### The system of virtues and φρόνησις

In the entire corpus of St. Maximus the Confessor's works there are several places where different systems of virtues are classified according to a certain criterion. Often, the virtues in these systems have different, and sometimes, contradictory roles. Below we will analyse several of them where φρόνησις has crucial role.

St. Maximus the Confessor is elaborating the system of virtues that corresponds to the classical fourfold division of the ancient cardinal virtues in "Ambigua to John". As the Gospels are four in number, he says, so are the number of natural elements, so are the parts of the spiritual life of the mind, and so are the number of the virtues (*Amb. Io. 1245A*). According to von Balthasar, this classification represents a supreme synthesis of virtues where St. Maximus constructed the supreme polarity (von Balthasar, 1988, 343). The virtues express the inner coherence of the soul, simultaneously comprising the intelligible world in us, and the world around us. In this system φρόνησις has a specific function aimed at charity. St. Maximus does not define a place of charity as an individual virtue in the systems of virtues because he thinks that charity represents virtues' highest unity, their unifying force. In this classification, φρόνησις together with righteousness are united in wisdom, courage and moderation in gentleness, and wisdom and gentleness are united in charity. "Wisdom is the perfection and limit of what can be known, just as gentleness is the perfection and limit of what can be practiced" (*Amb. Io. 1249A*). To φρόνησις, which belongs to the spiritual world, St. Maximus assigns the ether as an appropriate element in the sensory world, because φρόνησις is "a state of mind that illumines and reveals the spiritual principles inherent in each created being, unerringly bringing to light through these principles the cause that is present in them all, and succeeds in attracting the soul's desire for the divine" (*Amb. Io. 1245C*). The "Gospel according to John" is the corresponding gospel of φρόνησις because it rises above all Gospels, as a symbol of theology itself, because it begins and ends in a manner that is befitting to God. According to St. Maximus, the soul maintains the virtues because of the actualization of their internal potentials in relation to the senses, and for each virtue he determines the respective organ for this actualization. The virtue of φρόνησις is realized through the sense of sight and hearing when the cognitive activity agrees with the actual understanding of the corresponding object of perception (*Amb. Io. 1248D*). In this classification, St. Maximus is more inclined to Plato, than to Aristotle's meaning of φρόνησις, and gives φρόνησις more intelligible function.

The psychological theory, namely the doctrine of the division and structure of the soul, as well as in Aristotle, is the basis upon which St. Maximus generally develops the theory of virtues. However, in many places in the works of St. Maximus, this theory differs, and so the systems of virtues acquire a different form. For example, on the basis of the tripartite division of the soul to the irascible, concupiscible and rational part, in the "The Four Centuries of Charity", St. Maximus exposes the tripartite division of virtues. Here the virtues represent the proper use of the spiritual forces, while the vices represent the inappropriate one. Knowledge and φρόνησις represent the proper use of the rational part, the charity of the irascible part, and the self-mastery of the concupiscible part. The reasonable movement of the soul, according to St. Maximus, can only happen if the concupiscible forces are reduced with self-mastery, when the irascible forces are turned in charity, and when the rational part lives in prayer and contemplation (*De Char.*, 4.15; 4. 80).

However, in "Mystagogy" (*Myst.* 5) we can read the most systematically exposed theory of virtues, again, founded on a complex psychological theory. Here, the role of φρόνησις is most clearly represented. The soul, he says, consists of an intellectual faculty (νοερά δύναμις), which moves freely according to its own will, and a vital faculty (ζωτική δύναμις), which is motionless and by nature does not possess freedom of will because of the power of passions. The soul, according to him, has two kinds of power: reason (διάνοια) and mind (νοῦς). St. Maximus defines their functions in the following way:

The mind is the mover of the intellectual faculty whereas the reason provides for the vital faculty. The former, that is, the mind, is and is called wisdom when it directs its proper movements altogether unswervingly toward God. In the same way the reason is and is called prudence when in uniting to the mind the activities of the vital faculty wisely governed by it in sensible direction... (*Myst.* 5)

Here, and in other places, St. Maximus does not make the difference between the capacity/part of the soul and the corresponding virtue. In the following passages he determines their status: the mind is wisdom in potentiality, and the reason is φρόνησις in potentiality. This Aristotelian explanation within the concepts of potentiality-actuality, explains mind-reason and wisdom-φρόνησις as two states of the same faculty.

In the following paragraphs St. Maximus clarifies φρόνησις that: "ends up at the good by means of faith in the active engagement of its body in virtue" (*Myst.* 5). In this formulation he emphasizes several aspects that are particularly important for the understanding of φρόνησις: "active engagement", "of its body" that "ends up at the good", "by means of faith".

Φρόνησις always refers to practice; hence it is always accomplished in a bodily manner. It is a judgment that refers to the “vital faculty” whose principles for proper functioning always come from an ability other than itself. Φρόνησις, agree both Aristotle and St. Maximus, is an “active engagement”, departing from the view that unrealized virtue is not virtue and it must be constantly actualized through virtuous action. Φρόνησις represents the driving force that moves reason to come to moral action. So, the telos of this action is the attainment of good, but through faith. Through virtue the true inner certainty of God can be attained, which reason first has it potentially through φρόνησις, and is further realized when φρόνησις’ works are revealed through virtue. In faith, φρόνησις finally ceases its activity and finds its perfection. Good is the last boundary of faith where reason finds its peace and finites its natural movement. The model by which the soul can attain union with God through reason and φρόνησις can be shown as follows:

Soul (ψυχή) → reason (λογικόν): → reasoning (λόγος) → prudence (φρόνησις) → action (πράξις) → virtue (ἀρετή) → faith (πίστις): good (αγαθόν) → **God (θεός)** (Karayannis, s. a., 12)

This model, in fact, represents the dynamics of *vita practica*.

### Vita practica

With the structure *vita practica-vita contemplativa-vita mystica* St. Maximus describes the phases of Christian life. These phases represent the formation of spiritual life, in philosophical, moral, liturgical, and theological sense, as well as the progress towards the fulfilment of the ultimate goal of human beings - achieving similarity with God. Do these *vitae* represent developmental stages and follow chronological order, whether there is superiority of *vita contemplativa* over *vita practica*, and whether they have equal value – these are questions that can be posed, bearing in mind that St. Maximus constantly insists on their separation.

He often refers to the first phase as a “practical philosophy” (πρακτική φιλοσοφία), expression that according to Thunberg means that St. Maximus attaches high evaluation to *vita practica* (Thunberg, 1995, 335). This phase is related to the development of virtues and therefore he also refers to it as “ethical philosophy”. Under the influence of the Evagristic tradition, traces of the point of view that *vita practica* is a preparatory phase in attaining true knowledge in St. Maximus’ thesis can be found. A prerequisite for a successful *vita practica* is the knowledge of our own fall, and the goal is to heal the human spiritual forces and to return them to the original state (Настески, 2017, 563). Thus, the person who has chosen God’s way not only needs to detach herself from the passions and to rise above them, but the goal of *vita practica* is also the attainment of virtues. By nurturing virtues,

the soul becomes motionless for evil (*De Char.* 1. 36). An important aspect of the *vita practica* is the actualization of the rational human nature, especially the rational ability that is directed to practice - φρόνησις. Through φρόνησις it is possible to achieve the objectives of *vita practica*, and one of them is to attain the virtuous state of detachment of the passions, as a calm state of mind. The person who attained φρόνησις then is ready to look at things in an appropriate way and react only to things that are true, good and beautiful. *Vita practica* is actually the first step that leads man to the natural direction (κατὰ φύσιν) on the road to reintegration with God, in becoming a person (Cf. Γεωργιέβα, 1993, 56-71). The movement of man by nature is a movement according to his *logos* of being (Tollefsen, 2008, 184). St. Maximus goes that far as to claim that the one who lives *vita practica* receives the incarnation of the Logos in his virtues.

However, the fact that St. Maximus the Confessor is not an advocate of the *sola fide* thesis, at the same time does not entail that he is an advocate of the *solis operibus* thesis. He establishes a specific relationship between *vita practica* and *vita contemplativa* that depicts man as an image of God, God as good - through *vita practica*, and God as truth - through *vita contemplativa*.

### The unity of *vita practica* and *vita contemplativa*

In “Mystagogy” St. Maximus presents the unity of the process of the Christian spiritual life. According to him, the path from φρόνησις to πίστις is not the only path to God considering soul’s capacities. The final goal of reason is identical with the goal of the mind, and therefore, in a teleological context, the action of the soul cannot be divided, regardless of its different functions. The path of reason towards God that is revealed through good is parallel to the path of the mind towards God, revealed through the truth. In the same manner as reason, φρόνησις, action, virtue and faith ending with the good belong to deliberative part of the soul, also the mind, wisdom, contemplation, knowledge and enduring knowledge that end with the truth, belong to the contemplative part of the soul. Unlike the end of the path of reason when God appears as good through his energies, at the end of the path of the mind, God is revealed in his nature. The model of the parallel path to God can be shown as follows:

**Soul** (ψυχή) → mind (Θεωρητικόν): intelligent mind (νοῦς) → wisdom (σοφία) → contemplation (θεωρία) → knowledge (γνώσις) → enduring knowledge (ἀληστος γνώσις): truth (ἀλήθεια) → **God** (θεός) (Karayannis, s. a., 12)

Although the path from φρόνησις to πίστις and from σοφία to ἀληστος γνώσις represents parallel paths that lead to one goal, their constituent parts intertwine, forming diads by means of which the soul approaches God, “imitating what is immutable and beneficent in his essence and activity by

means of its steadfastness in the good and its unalterable habit of choice" (*Myst.* 5). St. Maximus gives five such diads: mind and reason, wisdom and *φρόνησις*, contemplation and action, knowledge and virtue, enduring knowledge and faith. In their intertwining, none of them is reduced to some other. The last pair, says St. Maximus, signifies God - truth and good reveal God. St. Maximus is comparing the soul with a spiritual lyre of ten divine strings. When there is a harmony of the ten strings in the soul, they play the melody of the Ten Commandments, and then, when the soul can briefly turn the ten into one, it can be united with God.

St. Maximus is explaining the principle underlying this parallelism with a scene from the "Gospel According to Luke" (*Lk.* 22 8-13) (*Thal.* 3). Jesus sends Peter and John to prepare a Passover for the day of the Unleavened Bread. They will be brought in the house by the man carrying a jar of water who they will meet as soon as they enter the city. According to him, Peter symbolizes *vita practica*, and John *vita contemplativa*, while the man carrying the jar of water is the one who carries God's grace according to "practical philosophy" in the hands of virtues. The house represents the place of true piety toward which the "practical intellect" progresses, striving after virtue. The master of the house is the "theoretical" mind who dwells in it as if it is his by nature and which is illuminated by the Divine light of mystical knowledge. The Passover which should be offered there and from which all those who gather there will eat it, is the Logos. From this scene it can be clearly seen that the two types of functions must be in unity; the man who brings the jar and the master of the house are two different persons, but also one. According to St. Maximus, virtue and knowledge should be seen as separated in respect of piety, but according to their common nature they are not separated because the root of both lies in human nature. *Vita practica* and *vita contemplativa* are united by the Spirit, and are united and called *one* through the Logos.

According to this, it can be concluded that at every stage of the life of the soul the theoretical and the practical are intertwined. Thunberg estimates that the idea of a profound connection between the practical and theoretical function of Christian life is predominant in the works of St. Maximus, an idea that is related to the whole process of Christian perfection based on the view that man is a unity and the idea that there is a correspondence between man's natural virtues and divine qualities (Thunberg, 1995, 339).

Having in mind this synthesis, the discussion about the superiority, (non)simultaneity and the sequence of the two *vitae* becomes superfluous. The same is the case with the question of whether *vita practica* is just a preparatory stage in the spiritual development.



## Conclusion

Examining the history of a philosophical concept at the same time represents an examination of the philosophical contexts in which it develops, contexts that give that concept a special character. Although that concept preserves the key features during the historical development, every historical intellectual and spiritual period adds or subtracts certain characteristics, that makes this concept specific in that context. The medieval Western and Byzantine thought not only retains the cardinal position of φρόνησις which it had in antiquity, especially the position determined by Aristotle, but also gives this conception the position of *auriga virtutum* (charioteer of the virtues). However, φρόνησις follows the Christian worldview and evolves along with its basic standpoints.

Similarly to Aristotle, St. Maximus distributes intellectual virtues according to the segments of the intellectual parts of the soul. Φρόνησις, almost identically as in "Nicomachean ethics," represents the virtue of the rational force of the intellect that relates to action and which guide the vital faculty (in Aristotle, with moral virtues). The dichotomy within the intellectual sphere, both in Aristotle and in St. Maximus the Confessor, unlike the rest of the ancient tradition, especially the Platonic, points to two important distinctions. First, it is necessary to separate the two spheres of intellectual activity because of their different nature, one purely speculative, the other oriented toward the practical, and second, the practical action should always have an intellectual regulator.

What is radically different in the concept of φρόνησις in St. Maximus, apart from that of Aristotle's, is that the ultimate goal of φρόνησις does not consist in attainment of εὐδαιμονία, as in Aristotle, but in the union with God, which appears as the good through his energies. As the highest achievement of the practical part of the intellect we find charity and faith. The second difference consists in the fact that in spite of the differentiation of the two spheres of intellectual activity in both authors, St. Maximus, unlike Aristotle, claims that the two spheres act on parallel paths and have the same goal. Throughout the corpus, he tries to maintain the balance on both paths, guided by the Chalkidon formulation for diophysitism<sup>2</sup>. The conceptualization of φρόνησις in the works of St. Maximus the Confessor develops from the point view that the path to God, the only ultimate goal of man, starts from the virtuous life, but also from the point view that the Logos incarnated in human virtues. As St. Maximus claims, in the true Christian life, *vita practica* should be actualized in *vita contemplativa*, and *vita contemplativa* should represent a mystagogical practice - the virtue should be the revelation of knowledge, and knowledge should represent the power that maintains virtue.

<sup>2</sup> More on the personalistic aspect of the philosophy of St. Maximus the Confessor see Георгиева, 2001, 93-112.

Through the concept of human φρόνησις we can see very clearly the aspiration of St. Maximus the Confessor to reconcile the spiritual and intimate antinomies according to the example of God's φρόνησις. The transformation of inner life should be developed according to the paradigm of the eternal Logos that goes beyond the multitude of all principles and causes. This transformation is not an independent exercise in order to reach a certain transcendent state, nor a Plotinian spiritual abstraction from the ontological plurality, but rather a part of the transformation that began with the incarnate Christ and which, through the liturgy, leads to the ultimate transfiguration of the cosmos.

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