Christian Platonism and the Debate about Afterlife

John of Scythopolis and Maximus the Confessor on the Inactivity of the Disembodied Soul

Dirk Krausmuller

Mardin Artuklu Üniversitesi, Mardin, Turkey

dkrausmuller@hotmail.com

Summary

In the sixth and seventh centuries the belief in an active afterlife and its corollaries, the cult of the saints and the care of the dead, came under attack by a group of people who claimed that the souls could not function without their bodies. Some defenders of the traditional point of view sought to rebut this argument through recourse to the Platonic concept of the self-moved soul, which is not in need of the body. However, the fit between Platonism and traditional notions of the afterlife was not as complete as might first be thought. This article focuses on two Christian thinkers, John of Scythopolis and Maximus the Confessor, who were deeply influenced by Platonic ideas. In his *Scholía* on the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius John states clearly that after death the souls of ordinary human beings are inactive whereas the souls of the spiritual elite have entered the realm of eternal realities, which is entirely separate from this world. The case of Maximus is more complex. One of his letters is a spirited defence of the posthumous activity of the soul. However, in his spiritual writings he outlines a conceptual framework that shows a marked resemblance to the position of John of Scythopolis.

Keywords

John of Scythopolis – Maximus the Confessor – Christian Platonism – afterlife – self-movement

For Christians who wished to know what would happen to them when they departed from this world the New Testament made rather frustrating reading.

It only spoke about the distant future when the souls would be reunited with their resurrected bodies and gave no information about the state in which the souls found themselves until then. However, this silence did not discourage them from imagining scenarios that made sense to them. In Late Antiquity it was widely believed that disembodied souls would continue to function more or less in the same way as they had when they were still united with their bodies and that they would be able to communicate with the living.¹ Moreover, it was commonly thought that rewards and punishments would not be deferred until the Last Judgement but would be given immediately after death.² These notions provided the underpinning for two important religious practices, the cult of the saints and the care of the dead. The saints were regarded as powerful figures that could give help to those who turned to them. According to official teaching they were in Heaven where they acted as intercessors between God and the living. However, their devotees often regarded them as independent actors and believed that they toured their churches where they manifested themselves in dreams and visions and provided cures for various sicknesses.³ Unlike the saints who were thought to be in a state of bliss, ordinary Christians were believed to undergo punishment for their sins. However, it was widely thought that living relatives and friends could alleviate their lot by giving alms and saying prayers in their name. Eventually the church gave these notions a place in the Christian belief system. It taught that alms and prayers were only effective if the salvation of the beneficiaries was already certain and that they could not only bring instant relief but also effect a transferal from a place of pain to a place of comfort that prefigured Heaven.⁴

1 Cf. e.g. J. Mossay, *La mort et l'au-delà dans Saint Grégoire de Nazianze* (Recueil de travaux d'histoire et de philologie, 4^e série, fasc. 34), Louvain, 1966, esp. pp. 157–163. This statement only refers to Greek authors; Syriac authors usually taught that the soul was in a sleep-like state. For a brief overview of the whole range of beliefs and their development cf. B.E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology*, Cambridge, 1991.

2 Cf. e. g. F. Halkin, “La vision de Kaïoumos et le sort éternel de Philentolos Olympiou,” *AB*, 63 (1945), pp. 56–65.

3 See e. g. G. Dagrón, *Vie et miracles de Sainte Thècle, texte grec, traduction et commentaire* (Subsidia hagiographica, 62), Brussels, 1978.

4 See e. g. P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago, 1981; Y. Duval, “Les saints protecteurs ici-bas et dans l'au-delà. L'intercession dans l'Antiquité chrétienne,” in: *L'intercession du Moyen Âge à l'époque moderne. Autour d'une pratique sociale*, ed. J.-M. Moeglin, Geneva, 2004, pp. 17–39; É. Rebillard, *Religion et sépulture: L'église, les vivants et les morts dans l'Antiquité tardive*, Paris, 2003; M. Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cult in the Age of Gregory the Great*, Oxford, 2012, esp. pp. 21–148.

This set of beliefs, which had gradually taken shape in the fourth and fifth centuries, reached its maturity in the sixth and seventh centuries. At that time it found its expression in two distinct literary genres, miracle stories and beneficial tales. The former described how saints appeared to sick people in recognisable shapes and then performed healings whereas the latter proved the efficacy of prayers for dead sinners through apparitions of those who had benefitted from them. The very existence of such stories shows that not everybody accepted the cult of the saints and the care of the dead.⁵ This opposition was given a firm shape in a text that circulated in Constantinople in the later sixth century. The author of this text claimed that all souls were inactive after death and then drew two conclusions, that the saints could not intercede with God or appear to the living, and that activities to alleviate the lot of dead sinners were useless since the dead were not aware of them.⁶ The text itself has not survived and is only known to us from a refutation by the priest Eustratius, a close associate of the Constantinopolitan patriarch Eutychius.⁷ Unfortunately Eustratius contents himself with piling up quotations from Scripture and from Patristic and hagiographical literature that support his own position. This makes it virtually impossible to recover the arguments with which his adversary supported his views.

However, this impasse can be overcome through study of further texts. The best known of these texts is the *Questions and Answers* of Anastasius of Sinai, which date to the second half of the seventh century.⁸ In order to make the case that the souls are inactive after death Anastasius points to accidents and illnesses that human beings suffer when they are still alive. He reminds his

5 See G. Dagron, "L'ombre d'un doute: L'hagiographie en question, VI^e–XI^e siècle," *DOP*, 46: *Homo Byzantinus. Papers in Honor of Alexander Kazhdan* (1992), pp. 59–68.

6 Eustratius, *De statu animarum*, in: *Eustratii Presbyteri Constantinopolitani De statu animarum post mortem* (CPG 7522), ed. P. Van Deun (CCSG, 60), Turnhout, 2006, pp. 5.50–60, 18.395–400, 96.2342–2342.

7 On Eustratius and his work, see N. Constatas, "An Apology for the Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity. Eustratius Presbyter of Constantinople 'On the State of the Souls after Death' (CPG 7522)," *JECs*, 10 (2002), pp. 267–285.

8 On Anastasius and his work, see J. Haldon, "The Works of Anastasius of Sinai: A Key Source for the History of Seventh-Century East Mediterranean Society and Belief," in: *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, Volume I: Problems in the Literary Source Material*, ed. A. Cameron and L. Conrad, Princeton, 1992, pp. 107–147, esp. 118–125; and D. Krausmüller, "At the Resurrection We Will not Recognise One Another": Radical Devaluation of Social Relations in the Lost Model of Anastasius' and Pseudo-Athanasius' Questions and Answers," *Byzantion*, 83 (2013), pp. 207–227.

readers that when they are hit over the head they can lose their mind and that the impairment or loss of other organs can have analogous consequences. Then he presents the following *a fortiori* argument:

Οὐκοῦν ὡσαύτως καὶ χωριζομένης αὐτῆς, λέγω δὴ τῆς ψυχῆς, ἐξ ὅλου τοῦ σώματος οὐκέτι δύναται τι ἐνεργεῖν ὧν ἐνήργει, διὰ τῶν μορίων τοῦ σώματος, οὐ λαλεῖν, οὐ μιμνήσκεσθαι, οὐ διακρίνειν, οὐκ ἐπιθυμεῖν, οὐ λογίζεσθαι, οὐ θυμοῦσθαι, οὐ καθορᾶν, ἀλλ' ἐν συννοίᾳ τινὶ καθ' ἑαυτὴν ὑπάρχει ἀθάνατος διαμένουσα ἄχρις ἂν πάλιν τὸ οἰκεῖον σῶμα ἀπολαβοῦσα ἀφθαρτον, ἀφθάρτους λοιπὸν καὶ τὰς ἐν αὐτῷ ἐνεργείας ἀποτελεῇ.⁹

Therefore also when it, that is, the soul, is separated from the whole body it cannot do any of the things it did through the parts of the body, not speak, not remember, not discern, not desire, not think, not be angry, not see, but it is in a reverie by itself, remaining immortal until it again receives its own body in an immortal condition and from then on also performs the operations in it in an immortal manner.

The meaning of this passage is evident: since death entails the loss of all organs of the body the soul must fall into a coma-like state from which it will only awaken at the resurrection.¹⁰

Strikingly similar views are expressed in a somewhat older text, a Nestorian treatise dating to the late sixth or early seventh century, which is preserved in the refutation of Leontius of Jerusalem.¹¹ The anonymous author of this text frequently draws parallels between the incarnated Christ and the human compound and as a consequence gives us an insight into his anthropological views.¹² One of his arguments contains the following statement:

Μετὰ τὴν ἔξοδον τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκ τοῦ σώματος καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ πρὸς ἐνέργειαν αὐτοκίνητον ἀδυνάτως ἔχει ὡς ἐν ὕπνῳ βαθυτάτῳ καὶ μηδὲ ἑαυτὴν ἐπισταμένην

9 Anastasius of Saini, *Quaestiones et Responsiones*, 19.6, in: *Anastasii Sinaitae Quaestiones et Responsiones*, ed. J. Munitiz and M. Richard (CCSG, 59), Turnhout, 2006, p. 32.51–57.

10 See Dagron, “L'ombre d'un doute,” pp. 59–68.

11 On the date of the Nestorian treatise see D. Krausmüller, “Leontius of Jerusalem, a Theologian of the 7th Century,” *JTS*, 52 (2001), pp. 637–657, esp. pp. 650–654.

12 See D. Krausmüller, “Conflicting Anthropologies in the Christological Discourse at the End of Late Antiquity: the Case of Leontius of Jerusalem's Nestorian Adversary,” *JTS*, 56 (2005), pp. 413–447.

διάγουσα ... ἐπεὶ μηδὲν αὐτοπροαιρέτῳ βουλῇ κινούμενον μηδενὸς ἔχον ὅλως αἰσθησιν ἔστιν.¹³

After the departure of the soul from the body the soul, too, is incapable of a self-moved operation, remaining as if in a very deep sleep without even knowledge of itself ... because nothing that is moved through self-willed counsel is of a kind that does not have sensation of anything at all.

In this passage the Nestorian author claims that the soul can only function if it has access to the apparatus of sense perception, which is located in the body, and that it is therefore without self-awareness during the time between death and resurrection.

It is immediately evident that the Nestorian author shares Anastasius' view of the afterlife. However, he makes his case in quite a different way. Anastasius derived his arguments from medical literature, a fact to which he explicitly draws attention.¹⁴ By contrast, the Nestorian author has recourse to philosophical concepts. The term 'self-moved' that he uses played a crucial role in Platonic proofs of the immortality of the soul: if its movement is not dependent on external causes it can continue to be functional even after it has been separated from the body.¹⁵ However, the Nestorian author cites this term only to subvert its original meaning. Whereas Platonic philosophers defined the soul as a 'self-moved substance' (οὐσία αὐτοκίνητος) he speaks of a 'self-moved operation' (ἐνέργεια αὐτοκίνητος) of the soul, which requires the body.¹⁶ As a consequence the soul by itself is no longer 'actually self-moved' but only 'potentially self-moved' and it is rather the compound of body and soul that should be defined as 'self-moved substance.' This rather complex argument suggests that the Nestorian author was engaging with people who used Platonic concepts in order to shore up their belief in the posthumous activity of the souls.¹⁷ That such a debate did indeed take place can be seen from the treatise of Eustratius. Although Eustratius prefers to make his case through quo-

¹³ Leontius of Jerusalem, *Contra Nestorianos*, I.51, in PG 86, col. 1513D1–12.

¹⁴ Anastasius of Saini, *Quaestiones et Responsiones*, 19.9, ed. Munitiz and Richard, pp. 34.1–2.

¹⁵ For a brief summary see E. Osborne, *The Emergence of Christian Theology*, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 45–47.

¹⁶ See Nemesius of Emesa, *De natura hominis*, ed. M. Morani, Leipzig, 1987, p. 17.3–4 (11.68), with references to doxographical texts in the apparatus.

¹⁷ See e.g. Leontius of Byzantium, *Contra Nestorianos et Eutychianos*, in PG 86, col. 1281B10–13; ed. B.E. Daley, *Leontius of Byzantium: A Critical Edition of His Works, With Prolegomena*, Diss. Oxford, 1978, p. 10.3–12.2.

tations from authoritative texts he occasionally makes an effort to construct a proper argument. At one point he asks: "How can the intelligible and rational soul remain without movement or without operation, given that it is something incorporeal and ... that it is ever-moving" (Πῶς ἡ νοητὴ καὶ λογικὴ ψυχὴ δύναται μένειν ἀκίνητος ἢ ἀνερέργητος, ἀσώματός τις οὖσα καὶ ... ἀεικίνητος οὖσα).¹⁸ Such an understanding of the soul is ultimately derived from Plato's teachings, as are Eustratius' later statements that the faculties of the soul are in fact hampered by the body and will become not less but more active after death and that one can already dissociate oneself from the body in this life.¹⁹

The discussion so far suggests that Christian Platonists were the natural defenders of the posthumous activity of the souls, the cult of the saints and the care of the dead. However, a look at the writings of those Christian authors that were most deeply influenced by Platonic ideas reveals a much more complex situation. At this point we must turn to the *Scholia* on the Pseudo-Dionysian treatise *On Divine Names* by John of Scythopolis, a Palestinian bishop who lived in the first half of the sixth century.²⁰ As is well known Pseudo-Dionysius was heavily dependent on the writings of Proclus and John himself made use of Plotinus' *Enneads*.²¹ The best starting point for the discussion is a lengthy passage about the different faculties of the soul:

Καὶ πάσας ὁμοῦ τὰς δυνάμεις ἡ ψυχὴ ἐν ἑαυτῇ ἔχει, καθ' ὅς προνοεῖ τοῦ σώματος, καὶ ὅμως ἀσυγχύτως αὐτὰς κατὰ καιρὸν προβάλλει, τὴν μὲν φυσικὴν ἐνεργοῦσα περὶ τὸ σῶμα δύναμιν, καθ' ἣν τρέφει τοῦτο, καὶ αὖξει, καὶ πρὸς γένναν ἐπιτηδεῖον ποιεῖ· τὴν δὲ αἰσθητικὴν ἐνεργεῖ δύναμιν περὶ φλέβας καὶ

18 Eustratius, *De statu animarum*, ed. Van Deun, p. 15.326–328

19 Eustratius, *De statu animarum*, ed. Van Deun, pp. 52.1251–1253, 85.2067–2071. See C.J. de Vogel, "The Sōma-Sēma Formula: its Function in Plato and Plotinus Compared to Christian Writers," in: *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought: Essays in Honour of A.H. Armstrong*, ed. M.J. Blumenthal and R.A. Markus, London, 1981, pp. 79–95.

20 On John of Scythopolis see R. Aubert, "Jean, évêque de Scythopolis, dit Jean le Scolastique (première moitié du vie siècle)," *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie Ecclésiastiques*, 27 (2000), pp. 617–619. An edition of the *Scholia* is being prepared by B.R. Suchla. For a list of *scholia* that can be attributed to John with certainty see B.R. Suchla, "Die sogenannten Maximus-Scholien des Corpus Dionysiacum Areopagiticum," in: *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen. Philosophisch-historische Klasse*, 1980, fasc. 3 (Göttingen, 1980), pp. 31–66. All *scholia* discussed in this article are included in this list.

21 See W. Beierwaltes und R. Kannicht, "Plotin-Testimonia bei Johannes von Skythopolis," *Hermes*, 96 (1968), pp. 247–251, and R.M. Frank, "The Use of the *Enneads* by John of Scythopolis," *Le Muséon*, 100 (1988), pp. 101–108.

ἀρτηρίας, καὶ τὴν σάρκα, καὶ τὰ νεῦρα· καθ' ἣν δύναμιν τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἀντιλαμβανόμεθα· τὴν δὲ δοξαστικὴν, καθ' ἣν κρίνει τὰ αἰσθητά· καὶ τὴν φανταστικὴν, καθ' ἣν φαντάζεται τὰ αἰσθητά· ἀναζωγραφικὴν δέ, καθ' ἣν ἀναπλάττει· καὶ τὴν μνημονευτικὴν, καθ' ἣν μέμνηται· ὀρεκτικὴν δέ, καθ' ἣν ὀρέγεται, καὶ κινεῖ τὸ ζῶον κατὰ τόπον· καὶ εἰκαστικὴν, καὶ θυμοειδῆ, καὶ ἐπιθυμητικὴν. ταύτας γὰρ ἔχει δυνάμεις σώματι χρωμένῃ ἐν τῷ ἀλόγῳ αὐτῆς μέρει. Μετὰ δὲ θάνατον ὁ νοῦς μόνος ἔσται ἐνεργῶν, τούτων ἀργουσῶν.²²

And the soul has all faculties together in itself, with which it cares for the body, and nevertheless sends them forth in an unconfused manner, operating the natural faculty in the body with which it feeds it, and makes it grow, and makes it ready for procreation; it operates the sensitive faculty in the veins and arteries and the flesh, with which faculty we grasp the sensual things, the faculty of forming opinions, with which it judges the sensual things, and the faculty of imagining things with which it imagines the sensual things, and the faculty of forming images with which it forms images, and the faculty of remembering with which it remembers, and the faculty of yearning, with which it yearns, and moves the animal in place, and the faculty of making guesses, and that of becoming angry and that of becoming desirous. For it has these faculties when it uses the body in its irrational part. However, after death the only thing operative will be the intellect, while the others will be inert.

In this passage John gives an exhaustive list of activities that the soul performs together with the body. He attributes these activities to the irrational part of the soul, which human beings share with animals. It is immediately obvious that he has a very broad understanding of the functions of this part. They not only include the ability to maintain and replicate the body and the instincts and senses but also the ability to assess the images supplied by the senses, to analyse them, to base judgements on them, to act upon them, to store them and to conjure them up again at a later point. According to John all these faculties will be at rest after the soul has left the body. The consequences of this model for the afterlife are evident. Without their bodies the souls are entirely separated from the world of the living. Indeed, they are not even aware of their own past because they have no memory of their previous thoughts and actions. The only part of the soul that remains functional is the intellect, which does not engage with sensual images and is thus not reliant on the body.

22 John of Scythopolis, *Scholia in De Divinis Nominibus*, in PG 4, col. 320D10–321A14.

This raises two questions: how does John conceive of the intellect and its object, and where does he locate the rational part of the soul that engages in discursive thought? In order to answer these questions we need to turn to passages in which John makes use of Neo-Platonic concepts. Following Plotinus, he states that the intellect is simple and that it is directed towards the *nunc stans* of eternal being, which transcends all movement in time and space.²³ However, human beings only potentially have such an intellect because their souls have turned to the world of the senses and have thus become dissipated. As John says:

Ἡ γὰρ ψυχὴ ἔστραπται πρὸς τὸ πνεῦμα ἐν ᾧ εἰσιν ἐστηριγμένοι αἱ αἰσθήσεις καὶ οἱ λογισμοὶ δι' ὧν τὰ ἐν σκέψει λογιζόμεθα· ... ἐπεστραμμένη οὖν πρὸς τοῦτο τὸ πνεῦμα ἡ ψυχὴ ἐπέστραπται καὶ πρὸς τὰς ἐν αὐτῷ αἰσθήσεις καὶ δι' αὐτῶν πρὸς τὸ σῶμα· καὶ ἐν τῷ νῷ αἱ νοήσεις οἶονεὶ μερίζονται καὶ εἰς ἑτερότητας σκεδαστῶς προΐασιν, ἀπὸ πρώτης νοήσεως εἰς δευτέρας, εἰς κρείττονας ἢ εἰς φαύλους. φησὶν οὖν ὅτι ἀνατεινόμενοι πρὸς θεὸν γινόμεθα ὑπὸ τῆς ἐνάδος ἐκείνης ἐν ἡμέρᾳ τῶν πολυμερῶν ἡμῶν ἑτεροτήτων ἐκ τοῦ σκεδασμοῦ εἰς σύμπτυσιν ἀθροιζομένων καὶ ἐνοποιουμένων ὑπερκosμῶς, τουτέστιν οὐκ αἰσθητῶς, ἀλλὰ νοερῶς.²⁴

For the soul is turned towards the spirit in which are rooted the senses and the thoughts through which we think about the things that we consider. ... Turned then towards this spirit the soul is also turned towards the senses in it and through them to the body. And in the intellect the intellections are so-to-speak divided and go forth in a scattered fashion towards differences, from the first intellection to the second, from better ones to bad ones. He says that by reaching up to God we are made a partless one by that unity when the differences are brought together from their scattered state to a folding up and are united in a manner that transcends this world, that is in a manner that does not involve sense perception but intellection.

23 See D. Krausmüller, "Faith and Reason in Late Antiquity: the Perishability Axiom and Its Impact on Christian Views about the Origin and Nature of the Soul," in: *The Afterlife of the Soul: Platonist Theories of the Soul in Christianity, Judaism and Islam*, ed. J. Dillon and M. El-Kaisy, Leiden, 2009, pp. 47–67, esp. 59–63.

24 John of Scythopolis, *Scholia in De Divinis Nominibus*, in PG 4, col. 196A1–14.

The spirit of which John speaks here is a subtle but nevertheless material substance and thus belongs to the body.²⁵ Significantly this spirit serves as a substrate not only for all acts of sense perception but also for all thought processes. Since these thought processes take place in the rational part of the soul we can conclude that this part, too, is only functional in this life.

The soul can recover its independence from the body and return to its original state only if it makes strenuous efforts to reduce the multiplicity to simplicity. It is evident that the vast majority of people will never reach this state in their lives. They will only ever process information provided by the senses and they will do so sequentially by moving from one object to the next. Since all such activities are linked to the body the souls of these people will become completely inert after death. By contrast, the spiritual elite will enjoy the contemplation of the timeless realm. However, this does not mean that they will have a sense of self because this sense is only constituted at a lower level. This is very clear from the following passage, which describes a mystical experience:

“Οθεν οὖν πᾶσαν νόησιν περὶ θεὸν ὑπερβάντες ἀπλοῖ γινόμεθα, ἀγνοοῦντες λοιπὸν καὶ ἀδιάκριτοι μένοντες διὰ τὴν πρὸς τὴν ἐνότητα στάσιν, καὶ βεβαίως ἐστῶτες ἐν τῇ ἐνώσει, ἀγνοοῦμεν ὅτε ἀγνοοῦμεν· ... εἴτα πάλιν ὑποστρέψαντες ἐκ τῆς ἐν ἀφασίᾳ σιωπῆς καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς σιγῆς εἰς φθέγγιν καταβαίνοντες, συνιέντες ὅτι ἀγνοοῦμεν ἀφιστάμεθα λοιπὸν τοῦ περὶ ἀγνώστου ζητεῖν.”²⁶

Wherefore then having transcended all intellection about God we become simple, not knowing and remaining without critical faculties through rest in unity, and standing securely in the union we do not know that we do not know. ... Then again returning from the silence in speechlessness and descending from silence to utterance we understand that we do not know and thus have stopped searching what is unknown.

The notion of a higher faculty that is self-sufficient and can thus continue to be operative after death is alien to Anastasius of Sinai and the Nestorian author who only recognise activities of the soul that are dependent on the body. However, in regard to the traditional belief system this difference is irrelevant since John, too, makes it clear that communication between the dead and the living

25 On this spirit see H.U. von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy. The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, San Francisco, 2003, pp. 372–378.

26 John of Scythopolis, *Scholia in De Divinis Nominibus*, in PG 4, col. 217A6–B6.

is impossible. This means that the saints cannot hear the prayers of their devotees or appear to them in dreams and visions, and that ordinary souls can have no sense of the good deeds that their friends and relatives perform in their name. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that in his daily life John considered prayers to saints or prayers for the dead to be effective. However, if he really accepted these practices it still remains the case that he made no effort to modify his Neo-Platonic conceptual framework in such a way that it would allow for the posthumous activity of saints and sinners.

The Platonising strand of Christian spirituality was still in existence a hundred years later when Maximus the Confessor undertook it to write further *Scholia* on Pseudo-Dionysius.²⁷ Unlike John, Maximus participated in the debate about the afterlife, with a letter addressed to a friend that in the manuscripts bears the title “about the fact that the soul has its intellectual operation also after death and that it does not lose any natural faculty” (περὶ τοῦ καὶ μετὰ θάνατον ἔχειν τὴν ψυχὴν τὴν νοερὰν ἐνέργειαν, καὶ μηδεμιᾶς ἐξίστασθαι φυσικῆς δυνάμεως).²⁸ In this letter Maximus complains that the notion of a sleep of the soul is gaining ground in monastic circles and then produces a series of arguments that could be used in order to rebut it. Having stated that “the faculties of discursive thought and intellection” (τὸ λογικὸν τε καὶ νοερὸν) are constitutive parts of the soul and can therefore not be removed without destroying it he goes on to explain why these faculties must always be active:

Εἰ δὲ ζῆν αὐτὴν ὑποτίθενται, καὶ λόγῳ, εἰ καὶ μὴ πράγματι, τὸν παρὰ πάντων ὑφορώμενοι ἔλεγχον, πάντως καὶ κινεῖται. πᾶσα γὰρ ζῶν τῶν γενητῶν ἐν κινήσει δείκνυται. εἰ δὲ κινεῖται, καὶ ἐνεργεῖ πάντως. πᾶσα γὰρ κίνησις δι' ἐνεργείας ἐκφαίνεται. εἰ δὲ ἐνεργεῖ, φυσικῶς πάντως κινουμένη, καὶ οὐ θετικῶς ἢ κατὰ συμβεβηκός, ἐνεργήσῃ. οὐ γὰρ κυκλοφορικῶς ἢ μεταβατικῶς, ἀλλὰ νοερῶς τε καὶ λογικῶς. εἰ δὲ νοερῶς τε καὶ λογικῶς καὶ ζῆ καὶ κινεῖται καὶ ἐνεργεῖ, λογίζεται πάντως καὶ νοεῖ καὶ γινώσκει.²⁹

If they assume that it is alive (sc. after death), in word if not in reality, because they fear the rebukes of everybody, it (sc. the soul) is definitely

27 See P. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence*, Oxford, 1993, pp. 14–15.

28 Maximus Confessor, *Epistula VII*, in *PG* 91, col. 433–440. See G. Benevich, “Maximus the Confessor’s Polemics against Anti-Originism. Epistulae 6 and 7 as a Context for the Ambigua ad Iohannem,” *Revue d’Histoire Ecclésiastique*, 104 (2009), pp. 5–15.

29 Maximus the Confessor, *Epistula VII*, in *PG* 91, col. 436C1–13.

also moving, for all life of those who have come to be is shown to be in movement. But if it is moving, it is definitely also operating, for all movement is made manifest through operation. But if it operates, it will operate by moving according to its nature, and not through ascription nor in an accidental manner, for (sc. it does not move) in circles or in a straight line but intellectually and rationally. But if it lives and moves and operates in an intellectual and rational manner, it definitely also engages in discursive thought and intellection and cognition.

From these arguments Maximus draws the conclusion that the soul does not stop engaging in the activities of intellection, discursive thought, and cognition after it is separated from the body.

It is immediately evident that such a view is irreconcilable with the conceptual framework of John of Scythopolis. As we have seen John claims that the faculty of discursive reasoning is inoperative in death and that the souls of the perfect who have ascended to the realm of timeless reality have left behind their powers of cognition. Thus one might think that Maximus has jettisoned the Neo-Platonic framework in order to be able to defend the posthumous activity of the souls. However, study of his spiritual writings suggests that his position is much less straightforward than it may first seem.

These writings contain passages in which Neo-Platonic teachings are reproduced without any significant modifications. In his treatise *Mystagogia*, for example, Maximus explains:

Οὕτω γοῦν ἐνοειδῇ γενομένην ψυχὴν καὶ πρὸς ἑαυτὴν καὶ Θεῷ συναχθεῖσαν οὐκ ἔσται ὁ εἰς πολλὰ κατ' ἐπίνοιαν αὐτὴν ἔτι διαιρῶν λόγος, τῷ πρώτῳ καὶ μόνῳ καὶ ἐνὶ Λόγῳ τε καὶ Θεῷ κατεστεμμένην τὴν κεφαλὴν· ἐν ᾧ κατὰ μίαν ἀπερινόητον ἀπλότητα πάντες οἱ τῶν ὄντων λόγοι ἐνοειδῶς καὶ εἰσὶ καὶ ὑφεστήκασιν, ὡς δημιουργῷ τῶν ὄντων καὶ ποιητῇ· ᾧ ἐνατενίζουσα οὐκ ἐκτὸς αὐτῆς ὄντι, ἀλλ' ἐν ὅλῃ ὄλῳ, κατὰ ἀπλὴν προσβολὴν εἴσεται καὶ αὐτὴ τοῦς τῶν ὄντων λόγους καὶ τὰς αἰτίας, δι' οὓς τυχὸν πρὶν νυμφευθῆναι τῷ Λόγῳ καὶ Θεῷ ταῖς διαιρετικαῖς ὑπήγετο μεθόδοις, σωστικῶς τε δι' αὐτῶν καὶ ἐναρμονίως πρὸς αὐτὸν φερομένη, τὸν παντὸς λόγου καὶ πάσης αἰτίας περιεκτικὸν τε καὶ ποιητήν.³⁰

30 Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogia*, 5, in: S. Massimo Confessore. *La mistagogia ed altri scritti*, ed. R. Cantarella, Florence, 1931, pp. 196–197.

When the soul has thus become uniform and is gathered towards itself and God there will no longer be the *logos* that divides it into many in thought, since its head is crowned with the first and only and one *Logos* and God in whom as the maker and creator of the beings, all *logoi* of the beings exist and subsist in uniform fashion according to one unthinkable simplicity. Gazing at him who is not outside it but completely in it, it, too, will know according to a simple intuition the *logoi* and causes of the beings, by which it was perhaps led through distinguishing methods before it was betrothed to the *Logos* and God, moving in a saving and harmonic manner through them towards him who is the embracer and maker of each *logos* and each cause.

Here discursive thought is presented not only as proceeding from one object to the next but also as ‘moving’ (φέρεισθαι) towards God. However, this movement is not infinite. It comes to an end when the mystic ascends to the level of the mind, which perceives its objects, the ideas within God, in a unitive fashion.

Unfortunately such passages make no mention of the afterlife. Therefore it becomes necessary to cast the net more widely. I will start with a chapter in the *Gnostic Centuries*, which offers an allegorical interpretation of the sequence of the days Friday, Saturday and Sunday. For Maximus this sequence has both a cosmological and a Christological dimension. In the former case it refers to creation when God worked until the sixth day and rested on the seventh day, and to recreation on the eighth day when God will make the world incorruptible, whereas in the latter case it symbolises Christ’s life, death and resurrection.³¹ The chapter reads as follows:

‘Ο τὴν ἔκτην θεϊκῶς μετὰ τῶν προσφόρων ἔργων καὶ ἐννοιῶν ἑαυτῷ συμπληρώσας ἡμέραν, καὶ αὐτὸς μετὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ καλῶς τὰ ἑαυτοῦ συντελέσας ἔργα διέβη τῇ κατανοήσει πᾶσαν τὴν τῶν ὑπὸ φύσιν καὶ χρόνον ὑπόστασιν, καὶ εἰς τὴν τῶν αἰώνων καὶ τῶν αἰωνίων μετετάξατο μυστικὴν θεωρίαν, σαββατίζων ἀγνώστως κατὰ νοῦν τὴν ὀλικὴν τῶν ὄντων ἀπόλειψιν τε καὶ ὑπέρβασιν. ὁ δὲ καὶ τῆς ὀγδόης ἀξιοθεῖς ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν ἀνέστη, τῶν μετὰ Θεὸν λέγω πάντων, αἰσθητῶν τε καὶ νοητῶν, καὶ λόγων καὶ νοημάτων, καὶ ἔζησε τὴν τοῦ Θεοῦ μακαρίαν ζωὴν, τοῦ μόνον κατ’ ἀλήθειαν κυρίως ζωῆς καὶ λεγομένου καὶ ὄντος, οἶα καὶ αὐτὸς γενόμενος τῇ θεώσει θεός.³²

³¹ See von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, pp. 348–350.

³² Maximus the Confessor, *Capita Theologica et Oeconomica*, I.54, in PG 90, col. 1104A5–B3.

He who has fulfilled in a divine manner the sixth day with the appropriate works and thoughts and has himself completed well his deeds together with God, has crossed through intellection the whole existence of the things under nature and time and has relocated to the mystical contemplation of the eons and the eternal realities, holding the Sabbath in the intellect without cognition through the complete relinquishing and transcending of beings. And he who has also been deemed worthy of the eighth day has risen from the dead, that is, from all things after God, be they sensible or intelligible, discursive thoughts or intellections, and he has started to live the blessed life of God, who alone is and is called in truth and reality life, since he himself has become God, too, through divinisation.

Here Maximus equates Friday with virtuous actions and thoughts and thus with the first two stages of spiritual ascent, ascetic practice and natural contemplation. He then explains that human beings must leave behind all such actions and thoughts if they wish to continue their ascent towards God. When they do so they enter the rest of Sabbath where they see the eternal realities that are beyond this world of time and space, in a manner that does not involve the human faculty of cognition. This is, however, only a transitory stage because the souls will eventually enter Sunday where they will be deified through participation in God himself.

The template of Christ's life, death and resurrection suggests that Maximus' statement has a historical dimension and that the Sabbath rest corresponds to the state in which disembodied souls find themselves during the period between this life and the life to come. Such a dimension is made overt in a passage in the *Ambigua ad Iohannem* where the motif of the three days is combined with another conceptual framework, that of the states of being. This framework is central to Maximus' speculation and has frequently been discussed by scholars.³³ However, its relevance for Maximus' understanding of the afterlife has not yet been teased out:³⁴

33 See e.g. von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, pp. 143–145, L. Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator. The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, Lund, 1965, pp. 369–370, A. Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, London, 1996, pp. 94–104, T. Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus the Confessor*, Oxford, 2008, pp. 172–174; L.R. Owens, *The Shape of Participation. A Theology of Church Practices*, Eugene, 2010, pp. 166–170, B. Bingaman, *All Things New: The Trinitarian Nature of the Human Calling in Maximus the Confessor and Jürgen Moltmann*, Eugene, 2014, p. 134. It would lead too far to reproduce the discussion, which has no direct bearing on our question.

34 The authors listed in the previous footnote tend to consider the afterlife as a unified whole, without distinguishing between the states before and after the resurrection. The

†Τρεῖς γάρ φασι τρόπους οἱ τῶν θείων ἐπιστήμονες. ὁ σύμπαξ τῆς ὅλης τῶν λογικῶν οὐσιῶν γενέσεως ἔχων θεωρεῖται λόγος† τὸν τοῦ εἶναι, τὸν τοῦ εὖ εἶναι, καὶ τὸν τοῦ ἀεὶ εἶναι, καὶ τὸν μὲν τοῦ εἶναι πρῶτον κατ' οὐσίαν δεδωρῆσθαι τοῖς οὖσι, τὸν δὲ τοῦ εὖ εἶναι δεύτερον δεδῶσθαι κατὰ προαίρεσιν αὐτοῖς ὡς αὐτοκινήτοις, τὸν δὲ τοῦ ἀεὶ εἶναι τρόπον αὐτοῖς κατὰ χάριν πεφιλοτιμησθαι. καὶ τὸν μὲν πρῶτον δυνάμεως, τὸν δὲ δεύτερον ἐνεργείας, τὸν δὲ τρίτον ἀργίας εἶναι περιεκτικόν.³⁵

†Those who are knowledgeable about divine things say that the entire *logos* of the whole coming-to-be of rational beings is seen as having three modes:† that of being, that of well-being, and that of ever-being, and that that of being has been gifted to beings firstly in regard of their substance, that of well being has been given to them secondly in regard of their free will insofar as they are self-moved, and the mode of ever-being has been bestowed on them in regard of grace. And the first encompasses potentiality, the second actuality/activity, and the third inactivity.

In this passage Maximus introduces the three states of 'being' (εἶναι), 'well-being' (εὖ εἶναι) and 'ever-being' (ἀεὶ εἶναι) and explains their significance. The *logos* or natural make-up of the human species includes the potential to make decisions. This potential is activated by each member of the species and then results in good thoughts and good deeds. What makes such activities possible is the ability to be 'self-moved' (αὐτοκίνητος). Although in the context this term primarily refers to the freedom to make autonomous choices it seems likely that it is also a reference to the Platonic teaching that the soul is self-sufficient because its movement is not dependent on external causes. However, this movement comes to an end when the soul enters the stage of 'inactivity' (ἀργία). The following passage describes this stage in more detail:

Καὶ τοῦτό ἐστιν, ὡς οἶμαι, τυχὸν τὸ μυστικῶς εὐλογημένον Σάββατον, καὶ ἡ μεγάλη τῆς τῶν θείων ἔργων καταπαύσεως ἡμέρα, ἥτις, κατὰ τὴν γραφὴν τῆς κοσμογονίας, οὔτε ἀρχήν, οὔτε τέλος, οὔτε γένεσιν ἔχουσα φαίνεται, ἡ μετὰ τὴν τῶν ἐν μέτρῳ διωρισμένων κίνησιν τῶν ὑπὲρ ὄρον καὶ μέτρησιν ἔκφανσις, καὶ ἡ μετὰ τὴν τῶν κεχωρημένων καὶ περιγεγραμμένων ποσότητα τῶν ἀχωρήτων καὶ ἀπεριγράφων ἁπειρος ταυτότης.³⁶

significance of the states of being for the history of the afterlife is not mentioned in N. Conostas, "To Sleep Perchance to Dream": The Middle State of Souls in Patristic and Byzantine Literature," *DOP*, 55 (2001), pp. 91–124.

35 Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*, in *PG* 91, col. 1392A4–13.

36 Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*, in *PG* 91, col. 1392C1–C9.

And this, I believe, is perhaps the mystically blessed Sabbath, and the great day of the cessation of the divine works, which according to the text of the cosmogony appears to have neither beginning nor end nor coming-to-be, the manifestation of the things that are beyond definition and measurement, which follows the movement of that which is defined by measure, and the infinite identity of what cannot be contained and circumscribed, which follows the quantity of that which is comprehended and circumscribed.

Here Maximus introduces the sequence of days as a second theme. The Sabbath is characterised as a day of rest in keeping with the account of Genesis and is equated with the cessation of all acts that take place within the confines of time and space. Yet this does not mean that this state is defined exclusively in negative terms. Instead the soul transcends time and space in order to enjoy the things that are eternal and thus beyond movement. This account of the spiritual ascent is virtually identical with the one that we have found in the *Gnostic Chapters*. However, the immediately following passage adds a new aspect:

Ὡς ἂν οὖν ἡ κατὰ προαίρεσιν ἐνέργεια χρήσαιτο τῇ δυνάμει τῆς φύσεως, εἴτε κατὰ φύσιν εἴτε παρὰ φύσιν, τὸ εὖ ἢ τὸ φεῦ εἶναι τὸ πέρας αὐτὴν ἔχουσιν ὑποδέξεται, ὅπερ ἐστὶ τὸ ἀεὶ εἶναι, ἐν ᾧ σαββατίζουσιν αἱ ψυχαί, πάσης λαβοῦσαι παύσαν κινήσεως.³⁷

However the activity that is based on acts of will uses the potential of nature, either according to nature or against nature, so will it receive it (sc. the day?) as having well-being and ill-being as its limit, which is ever-being, in which the souls keep the Sabbath, having received cessation of all movement.

Here Maximus no longer speaks only of 'well-being' and 'ever-being,' but adds 'ill-being' (τὸ φεῦ εἶναι) as a negative complement to 'well-being' (τὸ εὖ εἶναι). Both well-being and ill-being result from use of the human ability to decide what action should be taken. The former is brought about by good deeds and thoughts and the latter by evil deeds and thoughts. The outcome, salvation or damnation, is determined at the moment of death when human beings can no longer make decisions that would allow them to change their fate.

37 Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*, in PG 91, col. 1392C9–C14.

Accordingly we can conclude that Maximus' statement about the Sabbath has a historical dimension: it refers to the afterlife when the soul is separated from the body. As before, Maximus claims that in this state the souls are immobile. As we have already seen this does not necessarily mean that they are completely inert. The souls of the righteous are enabled by God to enter the realm of the infinite, which transcends all movement. However, such an experience is clearly beyond the reach of sinners who have not purified themselves so as to be ready for a vision of the infinite and who in any case have not deserved divine grace. In order to understand what condition they are in we need to turn to the following passage:

Ὅγδοη καὶ πρώτη, μᾶλλον δὲ μία καὶ ἀκατάλυτος ἡμέρα ἢ ἀκραιφνής ἐστι τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ παμφαῆς παρουσία, μετὰ τὴν τῶν κινουμένων στάσιν γινομένη, καὶ τοῖς μὲν τῷ τοῦ εἶναι λόγῳ κατὰ φύσιν προαιρετικῶς χρησαμένοις, ὅλου προσηκόντως ὅλοις ἐπιδημοῦντος, καὶ τὸ αἰεὶ εἶναι παρέχοντος διὰ τῆς οἰκειᾶς μετοχῆς, ὡς μόνου κυρίως καὶ ὄντος καὶ εἶ ὄντος καὶ αἰεὶ ὄντος, τοῖς δὲ παρὰ φύσιν τῷ τοῦ εἶναι λόγῳ γνωμικῶς χρησαμένοις, ἀντὶ τοῦ εἶ τῷ αἰεὶ φεῦ εἶναι κατὰ τὸ εἰκός ἀπονέμοντος, ὡς οὐκ ὄντος αὐτοῖς λοιπὸν χωρητοῦ τοῦ εἶ εἶναι, ἐναντίως πρὸς αὐτὸ διακειμένοις, καὶ κίνησιν παντελῶς οὐκ ἔχουσι μετὰ τὴν τοῦ ζητουμένου φανέρωσιν, καθ' ἣν τοῖς ζητοῦσι πέφυκε φανεροῦσθαι τὸ ζητητόν.³⁸

The eighth and first, or rather the one and endless day, which happens after the arrest of that which moves, is the clear and brilliant coming of God who fittingly takes abode in a complete fashion in those that have used through acts of will the *logos* of being according to nature and who gives them the ever-well-being by letting them partake of himself, who is the only truly being and well-being and ever-being one, but to those who have used the definition of being contrary to nature in their decisions, he gives fittingly the ever-ill-being instead of well-being, since they are not disposed towards it, and have no movement at all after the manifestation of what was sought, according to which that which is sought is revealed to those who seek it.

This statement, too, has a clear historical dimension. The eighth day begins with the Second Coming when the souls are reunited with their bodies and judged by Christ. This confirms our previous interpretation that for Maximus the Sabbath corresponds to the time between death and resurrection when the

³⁸ Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*, in PG 91, col. 1392C14–D13.

souls exist in a disembodied state. Here, too, Maximus makes mention not only of the righteous but also of the sinners. The former will enter into a permanent state of bliss, the 'ever-well-being' (ἀεὶ εὖ εἶναι), whereas the latter will enter into a permanent state of torment, the 'ever-ill-being' (ἀεὶ φεῦ εἶναι). This scenario is, of course, based on Biblical teachings about Heaven and Hell. The fact that retribution follows resurrection suggests strongly that Maximus, too, is thinking of physical punishment, which requires the presence of the body and its senses. This means that before the resurrection the souls of sinners are in a state of stasis where they experience nothing because they lack the senses of the body and are incapable of discursive thought since it, too, presupposes movement through time.

This interpretation can be corroborated when we consider the framework as a whole. As we have seen Maximus distinguishes between four states, firstly 'being' (εἶναι), secondly 'well-being' (εὖ εἶναι) and 'ill-being' (φεῦ εἶναι), thirdly 'ever-being' (ἀεὶ εἶναι), and lastly 'ever-well-being' (ἀεὶ εὖ εἶναι) and 'ever-ill-being' (ἀεὶ φεῦ εἶναι). In the second and the fourth state a distinction is made between the righteous and the sinners whereas in the first and in the third case such a distinction is missing. The second and the fourth case are clearly linked to each other. Until the moment of death human beings make choices that determine whether they will be saved or damned and at the resurrection they receive the ever-lasting rewards and punishments prepared for the saved and the damned. This raises the question: is there also a link between the first and the third state? As we have seen the first state is one of pure potentiality. At this stage human beings cannot be distinguished from one another because they have not yet made actual choices. This would suggest that after death the souls enter a second unqualified state, which does not allow for a distinction between individuals. At this point we need to consider that while the eventual fate of the souls is determined at the moment of death the appropriate rewards and punishments are not yet given because they presuppose the resurrection. This implies that in some sense the righteous and the sinners are in the same situation and Maximus does indeed make it clear that the souls of both groups can no longer move in time and space. However, this is clearly not Maximus' last word on the matter because he believes in the existence of a dimension beyond created being, which can be experienced without the help of the body and its senses. For the righteous the difference between 'ever-being' and 'ever-well-being' is then only one of degree since both stages have a positive content. Indeed, in a chapter from the *Gnostic Centuries* the state of 'ever-being' is elided and 'well-being' is directly followed by 'every-well-being'.³⁹ In any case the

39 Maximus the Confessor, *Capita Theologica et Oeconomica*, I.53, in PG 90, col. 1104C5–8.

reunion of the soul with its body is of little consequence to the righteous because it plays no role in the ascent from the vision of the eternal realities to deification. The situation of the sinners is markedly different. Their dissociation from the realm of time and space is the result not of a lifelong effort of purification but of a loss of their bodies, which permitted their souls to act and to think. Therefore their state must indeed be one of complete inertia, followed by eternal punishment after the resurrection.

Analysis of relevant passages in the *Gnostic Centuries* and the *Ambigua ad Iohannem* has revealed that Maximus operates within the same framework as John of Scythopolis. The souls of sinners are inactive whereas the souls of saints have entered the realm beyond time and space. As a consequence neither group should be capable of communicating with the living. This is a rather startling result because as we have already seen Maximus was a defender of the posthumous activity of all souls and insisted that intellection, discursive thought and cognition did not come to an end with death. Moreover, if the *Life of Mary* can indeed be attributed to him he would have accepted the traditional role of the saints within the Christian belief system (what he thought about the care of the dead we do not know).⁴⁰

This raises the question: how did Maximus reconcile these mutually exclusive conceptual frameworks? One possible answer would be that he believed in the posthumous activity of all souls and that his statements in the *Gnostic Centuries* and in the *Ambigua ad Iohannem* resulted from an unsuccessful engagement with the Platonic tradition that caused him to say things, which he did not really mean. Alternatively one could argue that the passages in the spiritual writings reflect Maximus' real convictions and that the arguments set out in the letter to his friend are a much simplified and even distorted version of these convictions. After all, he might have considered it imprudent to reveal his own position because ordinary monks might not have understood the subtle differences between this position and the contentions of the champions of a sleep of the soul and might have concluded that he, too, considered disembodied souls to be inactive.⁴¹

40 See S.J. Shoemaker, "The Georgian Life of the Virgin Attributed to Maximus the Confessor: Its Authenticity (?) and Importance," *Scr*, 2 (2006), pp. 66–87.

41 It is worth noting that Maximus does not always describe the final state as 'rest' but occasionally speaks of 'ever-moving rest' (ἀεικίνητος στάσις). However, this is not a simple return to discursive thought, see J. Zizioulas, *Communication and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, New York, 2006, p. 53. It must rather be understood as a condition that transcends both movement and rest, see J.P. Williams, *Denying Divinity: Apophysis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions*, Oxford, 2000, pp. 118–119.

To conclude: despite Plato's teaching about the self-movement of the soul neo-Platonic philosophy was just as irreconcilable with traditional Christian notions of the afterlife, the cult of the saints and the care of the dead, as the alternative model of a sleep of a soul. The defenders of such notions never seem to have developed a coherent conceptual framework. The speculation of Maximus the Confessor is so complex and even contradictory that it is virtually impossible to establish what he really thought, and men like Eustratius of Constantinople did not even bother to produce convincing rational arguments but preferred to make their case through recourse to apparitions of saints and sinners, which they considered to be self-evident.