Maximus the Confessor (580–662), who wrote a hundred years after the golden age of the commentators in Alexandria, is not an author often read outside patristic circles. Yet this original but difficult thinker deserves not only to be studied in the context of Christian theology but to have his place in the history of philosophy as the last great representative of the Platonic tradition in Late Antiquity.1 With this contribution I intend to contribute to such a philosophical reappraisal, by focusing on Maximus' views on theoretical or contemplative life and its relation to praxis. It should be noticed that Maximus spent most of his life in a contemplative context, in monasteries in Constantinople, in Cyzicus and in North Africa, what did not prevent him from playing an active role in the theological-political debate on orthodoxy. The relation between praxis and theoria was a topic often discussed in the monastic milieu, as can be seen in the work of Evagrius (345–399), who also deeply influenced Maximus.2 In this essay I do not offer a comprehensive overview of Maximus' views on praxis and theoria, drawing on all relevant passages in his different works, but I will examine in detail one particular text, which deals with this subject. In my view further progress in our understanding of Maximus' thought will come from a close reading of some crucial texts rather than from another general exposition of which we have already some fine examples.3 My argument will be entirely based on an interpretation of Ambigua ad Johannem VI (10), a fascinating but also dreadfully dense and complex text, which asks for a close reading and detailed comments. Having noticed

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1 There is a chapter on Maximus by Sheldon-Williams in Armstrong (1967) 492–505 and he figures again in a separate chapter (by D. Bradshaw) in the recently published Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Gerson (2010) 813–828. Also Gersh (1978) offers an interesting attempt to situate Maximus in the history of late antique and earlier medieval philosophy.

2 On Maximus’ life and work see the introduction of Louth (1996).

3 See Balthasar (1961); Völker (1965); Thunberg (1965, 1995²); Kapriev (2005) 45–104 (on praxis and theoria, see 95–98).
the lamentable state of most modern translations I decided to include in my argument long sections in translation based on the new edition in preparation.⁴

I. Why Does Gregory of Nazianzus Not Mention Praxis as a Way to God?

In his Book of *Ambigua* or *Apories* Maximus offers his views on a series of problems concerning the interpretation of some passages in the works of Gregory of Nazianzus, which were discussed in the learned circles of monasteries. The problems had been assembled in a letter addressed to Maximus by bishop John of Cyzicus. In his reply Maximus goes far beyond the usual format of a solution of problems. The difficulties John raises in his letter offer him an opportunity to develop his own thought in an original way. In the sixth *Ambiguum* Maximus is asked to comment on a difficult passage in Gregory of Nazianzus’ *Oratio* 21.2.⁵ Gregory composed this oration as an encomium in honour of Athanasius of Alexandria six years after his death in 379. As Gregory himself declares, it was not just his intention to praise a saintly friend. In praising Athanasius he wanted to celebrate the virtues the saint had practiced in his life in an exemplary way.⁶

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⁴ There are three modern translations of the *Ambigua ad Johannem* VI: E. Ponsoye (*Ambigua. Saint Maxime le Confesseur*, Paris 1994); A. Louth (*Maximus the Confessor*, London 1996; contains only the translation of Amb. VI and LXVII); C. Moreschini (*Massimo Il Confessore, Ambigua*, Milano 2003). The French translation contains numerous errors. The English version, the work of an international authority on Maximus, has great literary qualities but is often deformed by serious translation errors. The Italian translation is usually better than the English, but has its own errors. In many cases the medieval Latin translation of John Scot Eriugena (ninth century) in the excellent edition of Jeanneau (1988) is of greater help than any existing modern translation. It must be said, however, that Maximus often writes an extremely complicated Greek. In my own translations I usually started from Louth’s translation correcting and rewriting it where needed. I shall not enter a discussion on the translation, justifying my corrections. Although I corrected Louth’s version often substantially, I gratefully recognize that I depend on him in my search of an appropriate English vocabulary. For this study I could make use of the new edition of the *Ambigua* in preparation by Carl Laga (Leuven), which is supposed to appear in the *Series Graeca* of the *Corpus Christianorum*. Quotations are from that edition in preparation. I add, however, references to the edition of *PG* 91. In this part of the text there are not many significant divergences with the *PG*.


⁶ Some hundred years later Marinus will praise in his *Life of Proclus* his master Proclus for having ascended through all levels of virtue.