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SELF IDENTITY OR RETURNING TO SELF? PARADOXES OF THE EUROPEAN IDEAL OF EDIFICATION

Abstract

If the ancient Greeks were the first to formulate the need for *paideia* as one means to cultivate the self, modernity brings bring the concept of *bildung* – edification – to the table. But the complexity of the European cultural model is probably best illustrated by the human edifying path described by Christianity, especially by its Eastern branch. In this case, edification is understood as *kenosis*, self - emptying – which must not be seen as the anihilation of one’s personality but as an the experience of that which was called the *returning to the self*.

Keywords: self, person, edification, cultural model

Our tough conscience to be an individuality that may not be altered or diminished originates in intuitions and formulations of the Greeks. For a better understanding of what we should look for and why we feel the need to search something related to what is deeper in us, we must return to the essential texts of the Greeks. Heidegger is the philosopher of modern times that proves this in all respects. It is out of discussion ending, at a certain time, the exegesis of texts that marked our self conscience as we know it today, because the need of self understanding is continuous and always recalls existential history which it draws from. For a better understanding, we must better understand those that had the intuitions and took the founding decisions particular to us, too.

As Werner Jaeger points out, we cannot challenge the fact that the Greeks were the ones that debated on the issue of human individuality; therefore any history of the concept of personality must depart from them¹. Now it is only natural to understand man under the instance of individual and personality with all the meanings of these distinct characters that individualize and differentiate, but this

¹ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia*, vol. I, Ed. Teora, București, 2000, p. 15.

mutation is related to an exceptional novelty in the Greeks' understanding of the self in the ancient times. Jaeger believes that this radical innovation might come from an innate sense of the Greek for what corresponds to "nature"². They are the first to draw up the concept of nature as it was proper to them to see things in an organic way (to see things). As opposed to Vedathin, Indian Brahmanism, which stated that Brahman is the ultimate reality, the rest being magic or illusion of God (or of collective ignorance, according to a late rephrasing of Buddhism), Greeks established that the organic solidarity of nature does not annul in any way the features of individuality. This distance between East and the Greeks will remain a generic one, valid for all the subsequent path of the manifestation of the two cultural attitudes until present day.

This crossroad of self conscience change brought with itself the outlining of another need concerning education. As Jaeger states, the clear conscience of natural principles of human life and of the immanent laws that govern man's body forces must have become very important when Greeks faced the issue of education. The Greeks used all their knowledge on nature and individual for the purpose of man's formation task in the same way the potter creates pottery. The most important masterpiece achieved by the Greeks is the living man³. For the first time, the *paideutic* act is seen as a process of conscious structuring. The Greeks were dominated by the obsession of discovering the laws that govern reality under all its aspects and articulations, trying to guide people's life according to it. This act of search received the name of *theoria*, a display in knowledge that definitely contains more than the rational element. We have to revise most of our understanding of the Greeks as only a source of logically formal oriented rational thought or of philosophic speculation. *Theoria* is, perhaps, one of the most outstanding examples of full knowledge and is somehow incomplete to reduce it to what is commonly understood nowadays by knowledge. The Greek's postulation of the need for formation was especially related to the orientation of the one that experienced knowledge so that one could be as able as possible to grasp what overpasses the pure logical and rational categories of the mind.

The need of formation could become a conscious and very important need for the Greek due to an essential and extraordinary association: between soul or what the Greek called *psyche* and man's divine origin. And especially, as Rohde points out, „at a certain moment the idea of the divine character of the human soul and, by this fact itself, of its immortality occurs in a clear shape in Greece, and nowhere else so early than in Greece"⁴. A big step was already taken when *psyche* was the basis of the Greek's individuality not only in this life, but also in the other. If this latest understanding belongs to the period of mythology, the Homeric myths being

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

⁴ Erwin Rohde, *Psyche*, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1985, p. 217.

the most significant here, to philosophy belongs the expression of the need for *katharsis* as sign of Divine origin of what is higher in us and must be purified to take back the lost place in the world of gods. It seems that the initiation rites, those from Eleusis or the Orphic ones, played an important role in the certification of the association between *psyche* and something divine in man, the highest part of him that inhabited the body consequently to a fall from a higher reality. Therefore man had to pass through the initiation rite to recover his lost condition after death. Yet, the philosophic exercise is the one that gave credit to an even more important association: when soul is considered as equal to reason⁵. Besides, one of the main tasks of philosophy for the Greek, if not the essential task of philosophy exertion, was the accomplishment of the catharsis act that aimed at a superior posthumous existence. The reason, the favored capacity of the soul is a power that can and must be exerted. However, the purpose of such an exertion is not the simple use of the mental availability to make analyses or syntheses, or to acquire knowledge according to a certain rationality. The philosophic exercise was meant to produce a radical change in something related to the depths of the human being, to reorient it.

In the same measure, we must always use sources that have given an essential plus to the identity that we refer to: the *person's* dimension. Nonetheless, things get more complicated here, as we have in view another type of founding spirituality, the Christian one. It is a paradoxical spirituality even from the start, with respect to man's self. We cannot only talk of a scriptural tradition, but also of a tradition of another genre that we might call experiential and that is the basis of what is called Tradition in Christianity. In the central text of Christianity, the Gospel, Christ's statement that *for whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it*⁶, so that self edification is paradoxical and it seems that the theme of edification encounters a main difficulty. However, a closer look reveals that what the word of the Gospel aims at is self- edification originating in the self and having a purpose in itself, the trust that someone may be complete by himself and his own. To believe that it is possible to achieve something regarding yourself only based on your own powers and capacities does not correspond to the Christian spirit. It was very difficult to find the discursive phrases for the meaning of man as this meaning is revealed by the essential message of the Gospel: the Resurrection. Christ's resurrection meant, among others, the restoration of human nature, therefore a tremendous change of man's humanity. A restoration not fulfilling by itself, automatically, in man, but which respects his freedom and asks for his participation. On the other hand, by Baptism, man acquires a dimension that was unknown to him so far, as Christ becomes internal to him and then a Christian anthropology can no longer describe man only

⁵ E. R. Dodds, *Dialectica spiritului grec [Dialectics of Greek Spirit]*, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1983, p. 179.

⁶ Luke, 9, 24.

in the limits of humanity, and must remember that man changes his status simply by Baptism.

Thus, what Basil the Great or Gregory of Nazianzus aimed at when employing the term *hypostasis* was the outrun of the conceptual dimension of the terms describing man's humanity. Along with these Cappadocian Fathers, it became obvious that man, image of God, may no longer be framed in conceptual definitions as he is defined by *ex-stasis*, the self outrun and the exit from the self into personal communion. Communion with God involves that secret mutation of man's humanity into something beyond it, by *theosis*, by arriving at something superior to it, to divinity. But what becomes essential in this self ascension and overpassing of human nature is humbleness, *kenosis*, according to the teaching of the Gospel. That is self emptiness. Obviously, it is hard to properly speak of edification when the essential act of experience is self emptiness, giving up all that involves one's own will. However, there is no mortification here, but rather stating that there is a will more proper to you than your own subjective one and this will belongs to the One who is with you in a more delicate and deep way, but not as a will ready to annihilate yours. This extremely subtle situation of internal Christian experience was described by Saint Maximus the Confessor when speaking about the two wills of Christ.

The hesychast experience is an essential guiding mark in establishing the possible sense that the notion of self-edification can receive in Christianity and especially in the Eastern one. In the XIVth century, during a dispute arising from the demurs brought by Varlaam against the defense of the hesychast practice, Gregory Palamas described, among others, *self come back* or *self return* as a central aspect of the hesychast practice. This *self* is not an *ego*, as internal experience actually means a personal encounter with the One that is more proper to yourself (particular) than you are. It is hard to accept such a statement, as hard as it is to accept the following saying of the Apostle: „I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me”⁷. In the hesychast practice, we may find an equivalent of the modern term of *edification* as what happens is not a simple contemplating act, but rather a total experience that includes and outruns the duality subject-object in knowledge, towards a face to face encounter with the radical consequences on understanding and on the attitude towards the self and the world. Gregory Palamas considered that there is no place for spiritualism in Christianity⁸. This statement must be understood as a warning of the rigor and precision that the hesychast practice involved (up to a point a method was also involved). Palamas often mentions the *appeal to experience* as a marker of guiding understanding and spiritual

⁷ Galatians, 2, 20.

⁸ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Hesychasm: historical, theological and social problems*, Variorum Reprints, London, 1974, p. 201.

experience⁹. Actually, it was no novelty, only rephrasing because, invoked in a form or another, the criterion of the appeal to the testimony of experience was always present departing from the patristic texts and continuing later with the Byzantine authors¹⁰. This appeal to experience has a larger and deeper character than the understandings of modern empiricism. As John Meyendorff mentions, „By returning to the self, the hesychast does not search a subjective feeling, does not abandon himself to introspection to find an ego, but seeks Christ who became an objective presence in the Church by baptism and sacramental life and does not belong only to him but to all that have believed in Christ”¹¹. Anyway, experience is an indicator of the stage and correctness of the direction that the one that practices hesychasm is in, an experience whose meaning cannot be limited only to the dimension of interiority, but which is not purely external. It is essential that the *body* is recovered and plays a decisive role in the experience. Palamas pointed out that „it is not difficult to purify mind which easily loses purity, by its nature. It is for beginners. The true effort is to clean up all the faculties and powers of the soul and of the body”¹². The hesychast controversy confronted two anthropologies as premises of obtaining an answer related to the nature of knowledge, therefore also of understanding. Varlaam, the opponent of Palamas and the follower of the Western formula concerning the way of knowing God, insisted on the need of purifying the mind against any mixture with the senses. He implicitly rejected the positive role of corporeity in the act of contemplation/knowledge, the senses having only a distracting effect on the rational power from the highest act that was proper to it, the *contemplation of divine essence*. Eastern anthropology referred to by Palamas sustains that experience can by no means have a divine essence as its object but only what receives the name of *uncreated energies* and this knowledge is the result of the effort of all the human capacities altogether to open to the divine datum. The role of ascetics is described differently in the East: not as purifying the mind, but as restoring human capacities that may hardly be divided between body and soul capacities, as any act of the mind depends on a state of the body works. The texts of Gregory Palamas offer a privileged access path to the understanding that Byzantine people had regarding their own way of edification, as these texts are the result of a challenge of the Byzantine humanism, according to some scholars, or the Western perspective on experiencing the ultimate experience, according to others. It is the case of a terminological refining and completion that clarifies the intention and practice of hesychast practice that was not something new, being simply described in the XIVth century. A symbolic term with a special meaning for

⁹ Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, Paulist Press, New York, 1983, p. 57.

¹⁰ John Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, St. Vladimir Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1998, p. 144.

describing the Eastern Christian understanding of edification is that of *light*. If, in a synthetic way, the essential act of experience was designed as being *sight*, light is the one that enters sight and not any light, but the *uncreated light*. This type of sight act is not a passive one; it cannot be described in terms of a simple sensorial reception but a *unification* is performed in this way. Certainly, an extreme symbolism functions here, an apophatic symbolism as a content of this supreme experience cannot be pointed out, it can only be said that such an experience turns man in his whole being. There is something here that may be described as edification. Discussing this experience, Dumitru Stăniloae mentions important explanations: „In the light being the one who sees, he looks at the light. Escaping from all the others, the whole of him becomes light, and he turns himself into what he sees, better said, he unites unmingled with it, being and seeing light through light. Looking at himself, he sees light; looking at what he sees, he sees light, the power through which he sees is also light. This is the unification, as all these are one and he who sees can no longer be distinguished from what he sees and through what he sees, as everything is a light, different from those created”¹³. It is even spoken of a suspension of the activity of the mind¹⁴, but we must understand that the case here is of a suspension of discursive processes of the mind, of the *dianoetic* processes, remaining only another functioning of the mind, the *noetic* one, particular to such an experience. The difference between the two mind functions working in the Byzantine textuality was taken from Aristotle. If the *dianoetic* part of the soul (which was mortal for Aristotle) works for the things belonging to the world, where there are processes everywhere, only something having a similitude in the soul could be valid for contemplating the eternal ones: its *noetic* part (Aristotle considered it as the immortal part of the soul), the one beyond processing. In patristic tradition, especially since Isaac of Syria, it is always spoken of a suspension of the mind called *abduction*, a state in which processing ceases and that fusion where all becomes light occurs, a state beyond words and discursive phrases. Therefore, the Byzantine meanings of edification point out that this act is not an exclusively human one so that nowhere in orthodoxy, was a way of formation for the individual formulated to guarantee the achievement of a state as the aforementioned one.

The Eastern Christian spirituality had an anthropological doctrine that gives special attention to the body as early as its patristic origins. The anthropological topic of the *garment of skin* is less known and recovered nowadays. The starting point was the interpretation given to the passage in *Genesis* that describes the state of man after the Fall and the fact that God makes ”garments of skin”(Genesis, 3, 21) for the protoparents. Christian authors beginning with Origen dealt with this, as

¹³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama [Life and Teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas]*, Ed. Scripta, București, 1993, p. 58.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

they were greatly interested to clarify the anthropological dimension of this garment that is added to the human being not as an external piece of clothing but as part of him.

Origen hesitated whether to understand this addition as body or as a supplementary dimension to it. Of course, this was due to his Neo-Platonic education that devalued the body and regarded it as external and non-essential to the human being. Yet the Church Fathers severely criticized this hesitation for the dangerous implications that it had because it could totally change the understanding of the path for salvation as well as the significance of salvation¹⁵. Gregory of Nyssa or Maxim the Confessor mentioned that these "garments" have a double role, yet they must first be seen as the fruit of God's mercy because the two protoparents that had been driven away from Heaven were in an improper, painful condition on the dry and deserted land. These garments meant their ability to survive the new condition that they had reached as a result of their disobedience. The interpretation made by the Fathers is that we must see this *garment* as the burial of the Adamic body, the addition of something supplementary that comes from a nature that had been foreign to man until then – the irrational nature. The body becomes biological.

This biologism of the garment of skin has a double character. Beyond God's blessing so that man could stand his new earthly dwelling, this new dimension of corporality also meant the fulfillment of the warning that if the two were to eat from the tree of knowledge they will taste death. So on the one hand it is a blessing, on the other it is the fulfillment of the punishment that will befall humans. Yet this is not a definite curse, because it is precisely biologism and its accompanying necrosis that can bring about the unbinding of this state of fall by death. It is relevant to retrace the interpretation and description of the nature of this "burial" that humans acquire. Gregory of Nyssa and others draw our attention to the fact that we must see something more than biologism in the addition of this garment. Nowadays we could use the term "interface" in order to explain the patristic hermeneutics of the episode in *Genesis*. Symbolically, the "burial" represented all that pertains to human abilities to relate with the world. So biologism was not the only way to relate with the world, but it was also an essential dimension, that could be resumed as the *cultural mode of being of man*. The double character of the new anthropological dimension is manifested here: on the one hand, to need culture means to diminish certain abilities, a different previous state, yet it enables not just man's survival but also his meaningful disposition, the orientation of his life according to what was called value. By culture, by science, man can survive otherwise than on a purely biological level, and can meet an equally important need to know. We do not refer here to rational knowledge but to a much broader and comprising meaning, of the

¹⁵ Panayotis Nellas, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit. Perspective pentru o antropologie ortodoxă [Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person]*, trad. Ioan I. Ică Jr., Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 2002, p. 79.

kind that the word had in Scriptures, as a way of being with the world and in the world, but not beyond it. Something of Adam's lost dignity in Heaven as the master of creation has subsided. Culture is a garment to the extent that humans cannot immediately relate to the surrounding reality, or to *the self*.

Eastern Christian anthropology undertakes the study of human beings by stages; it does not talk about humans and humanity as such but about stages and existential situations that humans have gone through, in which they find themselves and that they will reach. This is the demarcation point from the anthropological practice inaugurated by modernity, an anthropology limited to the static description of human nature. This description has its roots in metaphysics rather than in science, because it aims to describe that which is stable and *essential*. The recuperation of the Orthodox anthropological perspective is very productive nowadays not just for philosophical discourse but also for the orientation of scientific research. In fact, the broader issue that needs clarification is how a certain doctrine on the person can be relevant for contemporary science. One could ask why such a preoccupation should not remain the province of humanities, of a field such as ethics. Whereas one can bring arguments to support the relevance of the data of such an anthropology for neurosciences, their contribution to border sciences, such as cosmology or quantum physics seems unclear. Yet such a discussion is valuable only when the general framework of the presupposition underlying it is revised, mainly those presuppositions that imply the possibility to approach the notion of person from the perspective of psychology or ethics but not from the perspective of ontology. These presuppositions belong to the direction that the European cultural model took at the beginning of the 19th century, and that can be best illustrated by how the Humboldt University of Berlin was constituted. To discuss the notion of person in an ontic register seems nowadays an artificial, far-fetched attitude. However, patristic texts, and all Eastern Christian texts, testify to the existence of such an understanding within the Christian space.

In the 20th century, Dumitru Stăniloae emphasised the need of such an understanding of one's personal mode of being, and, what is more, he gave a remarkable description of the implications of this vision. When man is understood as a modality of personal existence, he is not just a simple piece in a universal aggregate that is guided by immutable laws. The positivism that dominated the way to do science over the last three centuries, and whose influence is strong to this day, could not lend man anything more than the role of a ring in a chain of determination that is under the strict command of the causal laws of nature. This vision could hardly find a meaning to the notion of human freedom, and it has inevitably abandoned it to an approach that is ontically weak, namely the approach of ethics and, potentially, of psychology. So the notion of person could not be considered under any aspect of scientific research.

Obviously, as far as classical science is concerned, guided as it is by the rules of positive experiment and of its verifiability, personal reality as a mode of interaction

with the world cannot even be considered. Yet contemporary border science is in the situation to resort to what lies beyond the visible and the positivable when it must offer the description of a certain reality that eludes conventional scientific explanation. It increasingly takes into account the elements pertaining to the “data” of the personal mode of existence and influence. To a certain extent, medical, psychological or advanced research in neurosciences, could describe the influence that man can have on the world or on himself by focusing on Buddhist spirituality and practice. Certain exercises practiced in Buddhism were researched by Western doctors or psychologists, who could thus demonstrate the influence that the mind can have on the human body or the environment.

The contemporary recuperation of the Eastern-Christian perspective on the person can have significant consequences on sciences, especially in their border zones, because this vision presents an understanding of the person which supports explicitly a totally different dimension of the personal mode of existence. In this space the person is described as “active” on the ontic level, as having a radical influence on the created reality. Yannaras states that the person is, in principle, the only possible relation with beings, with the things that exist in reality. Beings exist only as *ob-jects* – namely, whatever exists does so only by relation to a person. This relation defines the existential character of beings as phenomena – beings *appear*, are manifested as what they *are* only as logos of their relation with the person¹⁶.

This understanding can also offer a rich answer to the question about human freedom, to the question of how this freedom can be described and understood. If the signification of freedom were to go beyond the borders of moral and moralizing discourse, then a consistent description of the effectiveness of the person’s influence must be offered, from the perspective of the relationship between freedom and determinism. One question should be answered first: how can the status of a person, and the framework of the personal mode of existence, be described. We have already pointed out that the static description of a person, or the description in terms of an essence, is excluded. The person is not a static reality; it is something that can be intuited. However, what we might call *dynamism* in this case is not exactly simply to describe or framed. This dynamism is not similar to flux or flow; it is something more radical, an ontic dynamism. The person is a reality that “does not stand put” in its very fundamental grounds. It “moves,” i.e. it “is in the making”, it becomes that which it was not.

In Orthodox anthropology man is not; he *becomes*, for he is called to go beyond himself, to be united with a nature beyond himself and all creation: to be united with God and, to a certain extent and with a certain meaning, *to become God*. The apophatism of the person is a phrase that must be interpreted in the light of this latter statement. The language of negation is more appropriate when one aims to

¹⁶ Christos Yannaras, *Persoană și eros [Person and Eros]*, trad. Zenaida Luca, Ed. Anastasia, București, 2000, p. 21.

talk about something that ceaselessly makes oneself and is beyond oneself in union with something above the self. Yet one must add that this calling and this proper feature of the person does not point to a single path, because everything is discussed within the limits of identity, of the irrepeatability, of unity. Nothing else exists but concrete persons and the concrete, unique and irrepeatable experience of each of them. As Stăniloae says, “The interpersonal conjugation of a human being’s various movements depends on the human being as such. The human being is lived in reality by persons. (...) Although each person has inside the whole human being, each person lives the whole human being in relation with other persons, or makes it real in relation with other persons. This is why, the experience of living the whole human being by each person, is united with the increase in the experience of living of the whole being by itself, in its own way, via the relation with other persons, who live it in their own way”¹⁷.

This is an important aspect according to which we can assert the existence of the free way of being of the person: persons are not conditioned in their experience, nor are they given, via any determination, the content of the experience of living and its orientation. We are dealing here with more than a psychological description of feelings (that could be determined), because the experience of living, as a fundamental state of the personal mode of existence, means much more. Stăniloae proposed the term “*experiere*”, which should be understood as an act whose consequence is a radical change in the subject of living. (In fact, it would be extremely interesting to discuss the relationships, similarities and differences between *experiere* and *experiment*.) The purpose of this personal, unique “*experiere*”, does not simply aim to simply enrich the experience of man, but it aims to create existential openings towards a reality beyond the self. Freedom is expressed in everybody’s capacity to open towards that Someone who calls them, but who does not oblige them in any way to achieve communion. “The work of the Spirit as person in us requires our free collaboration, which shows once again the importance that God gives us as persons. The Spirit requires from us to take possession of His work and make it our own through our own will and work. The Spirit does not force anyone, i.e. the Spirit does not cancel out the will that He Himself, as God, gave us through creation. He does not cancel it out because He Himself is free of all passions, including the passion to rule. Freedom is the most proper characteristic feature of the Spirit, of the authentic, supreme Spirit”¹⁸.

Yet the communion between man and his Creator implies the paradoxical union of different natures. Man cannot remain man anymore. This situation invites a lot of things to say and to think of, at least as much as such a paradoxical situation can

¹⁷ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Studii de teologie dogmatică ortodoxă [Orthodox Dogmatic Theology Studies]*, Ed. Mitropoliei Craiovei, Craiova, 1990, p. 224.

¹⁸ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă [Treaty of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology]*, vol. II, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al B.O.R., București, 1997, p. 149.

be put into words. Melchisedec Törönen asks, for instance, if there is a mutual interpenetration of natures or just a penetration of the human nature by the divine¹⁹. This *deification* of man or *theandria* means that what we call freedom is not something that has been simply given to man; it has degrees, and levels, that correspond to this human-divine communion that is dynamic and existential. Although man, as personal reality, has freedom by his very constitution, the manifestation of this freedom supposes something more or something less; it supposes a certain way of becoming actual that cannot be presupposed beforehand. Or, when human powers are degraded, when the effects of the Fall become manifest, the actualization of freedom is limited; it is marked by the limit of the inauthentic, of the improper (the sign of the *Fall*). The specific notion of *perfection*, that is typical for Orthodox spirituality, implies this way of increasing freedom. This is why the path towards perfection is a central topic in the texts of Orthodox spirituality.

This path implies ascesis and mystics. Thus, for Evagrius Ponticus or Maximus the Confessor practical life or purification means death with Christ, and progress by contemplation means resurrection with Christ²⁰. Thus, Saint Maximus talks about three types of spiritual crucifixion: in “practical philosophy”, via the abandonment of passions, which implies death visavis the temptations of the sensitive world; in “natural contemplation”, by giving up the symbolic contemplation of the mind with respect to things; simple and uniform mystagogy of theological understanding, the renunciation to all features of God for what He is in himself²¹. Yet this progress, or *betterment*, as it is termed, as gradual acquisition of a deeper freedom, implicitly supposes an increasing unfettering from limits and determination. At this point it becomes necessary to clarify the term *determinism*, according to its function in various contexts. Its current use is today connected to how the laws of nature are manifested. Yet when this concept is used in connection with the discussion about the person, it cannot have the same meaning, because in that which is proper to the personal mode of existence one cannot talk about the existence and manifestation of laws, the structuring of personal existence in agreement with some previous determination. And yet, as we have already stated, the notion of perfection implicitly contains the idea of progress in freedom and therefore, of a passage from *less* to *more*. This need is in agreement with the Scriptures; it does not arise from man’s original nature, but from the episode of Adam’s fall. It is a limit that, on the one hand, is the result of the exercise of freedom, and on the other hand, it constitutes an obstacle to its authentic exercise, in its highest meaning. This limita-

¹⁹ Melchisedec Törönen, *Union and Distinction in the Thought of St. Maximus the Confessor*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, p. 122.

²⁰ Lars Thurnberg, *Antropologia teologică a Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul. Microcosmos și mediator [Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor]*, trad. Anca Popescu, Ed. Sophia, București, 2005, p. 388.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 389.

tion, understood as the fruit of sin, ends up in death, and it is only Christ's deliverance that makes the *restoration* of man's humanity possible.

Certainly, this understanding of freedom means more than the possibility to exercise choice (although the latter is implied); it implies a mode of being that is corrupt in its possibility, a situation of being. Let us not forget that the notion of person must not be associated, in any way, to the soul or the spirit, because it is a reality that equally comprises the body. There are numerous examples of how the Fathers of the Church saw and described the person as complex and full reality, from which corporeality cannot be excluded. Thus, Saint Gregory of Nyssa envisioned human freedom in interaction with different parts of the human person and he explained how the body is connected to the mind and to free choice. Gregory envisioned the human person as a compound of various parts, each with its own dynamism. Among them, the highest is the intellect, whose main activity is the contemplation of various objects and their discrimination, especially the discernment between good and evil. Yet since the intellect is simple, the *aria* that includes the irrational soul is quite complex²². This irrational soul is linked to the body; it is a manifestation of the impulses of the body. According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, the human person is thus created so as to take part in all levels of material, immaterial and divine reality²³. The change of Adam's state after the Fall took place in the body; the body underwent change and addition, which equally implied the presence of a limit that had not been experienced before. This limit means, on the one hand, to live the duration that means inevitable flow towards death; on the other hand, it is a limit to man's possibilities of interior and exterior manifestation. This exterior limitation, which is translated in all human needs for survival – for this is the condition of the thickened body, of the garment of skin as a state of perpetual dying, means subjection to the laws of nature. *Genesis* indicates that this was not man's original state; it therefore falls under the province of the improper and the inauthentic.

According to exegesis in Patristic literature, the Fall of man, who had been nominated to rule over all Creation, brought about another state of the world, of the cosmos, affecting its each and every last stone. This conditioning that man, via his thickened body, starts to receive from nature is, after all, an effect of his own deeds. The fallen man's actual life on the earth means suffering and the pursuit of deliverance. This state has concrete consequences in man's complex relationship with what is called nature, and which includes his own corporeality. Christ's embodiment means the possibility to restore man's humanity, but only as something potential. This restoration becomes real in the concrete case of each man not identically, but in agreement with the characteristic features of the uniqueness of each

²² Verna E.F. Harisson, *Grace and Human Freedom According to St. Gregory of Nyssa*, The Edwin Mellen Press, New York, 1992, p. 172.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 177.

personal exercise of the freedom *to be*. The restoration must not be understood as man's return to that which is proper to him, to his lost existential state; this change leads to another relationship and another way to exercise his influence on nature and on creation. This change of relationship must be understood as real and not symbolic, as one that produces real and concrete effects in nature. The Patristic texts highlight the fact that this is how man opens endless possibilities to bring about change and novelty in nature. This does not imply the flouting of nature's laws and rationality, but contributing to actualize the potencies that it contains and that otherwise would have never become manifest. The patristic vision on the world is that it was created as *a setting*, as the *site* of encounter between persons.

The world does not have a meaning and a purpose in itself; it exists with a view to creating deeper and more effective possibilities for encounter between persons – between the Persons of the Holy Trinity and people, as well as between people. This is so because the person is the reality of the highest degree of existence, because she is aware of her existence and of the existence of persons and things. This is also so because the person exists as *I*, as *you* or as *he/she*, as a conscience aiming towards another conscience, as Father Stăniloae stated²⁴. Thus, the determinism of nature, the existence of some laws of physical reality, is not an eternal given; it was modified when Adam fell and it encounters continuous changes by the exercise of man's act of freedom, especially of the man who is on the path of restoration. It would be more appropriate to talk not so much about *natural laws* as about the rationality of the world, or, to be more precise, the *rationality of creation*. When we talk about the rationality of the world we give a more adequate expression to the purposes for which the world received its existence, a world which, for Judeo-Christians, cannot have, under any circumstances, a purpose and a meaning in itself, or could simply exist. If there are limits in Creation, and if they are not due to man's Fall, then the understanding of the limit must be positive: it is a limit that creates the possibility of communion, of the encounter, and that proves to engender an infinity of possibilities. This would be the meaning of some reasons of creation, of some *logoi*, as Maximus the Confessor calls them. Man's aim is definitely to overcome conditionings; this fact is apparent in the whole historical behaviour of humanity. Throughout his whole history on the Earth, man has attempted, by all means, to go beyond his conditionings, dependences and limitations. The fact that he does science pertains to this need as well.

Another aspect must not be omitted, i.e. the one sustaining once more the idea that according to the Eastern perspective, self edification is not consumed within the data and the limits of subjectivity: the understanding of man as *mediator*.

²⁴ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Studii de teologie dogmatică ortodoxă [Orthodox Dogmatic Theology Studies]*, Ed. Mitropoliei Craiovei, Craiova, 1990, p. 225.

Statement belonging to Saint Maximus the Confessor²⁵, this understanding of man's role in the world and beyond it involves its description as microcosm and, consequently its symmetry with the Cosmos. As Maximus describes it, mediation is carried out on several plans, starting from mediation between man and woman to mediation between sky and earth, between the sensitive plan and the plan beyond the body²⁶. This mediation that man is called to is possible because the entire creation is under the same Logos, sharing a mutual rationality. Therefore self edification cannot have a finality that exclusively aims at the ego, at the subjectivity but plays an essential role in the evolution and conduct both of the sensitive world and of the whole creation. Self edification equals to generating an objective change in reality, to giving a plus to it in terms of its deepest rationality. As Paul Blowers remarks, Maximus sees that man is called to consistently integrate the macrocosm with the microcosm, the objective perspective with the subjective one, in a common vision of spiritual *transitus*. The natural tension in the macrocosm between sensitive and intelligible reality must be mediated in the human microcosm via the spiritual vocation that is proper to the man of ascetic practice and contemplation²⁷. This mediation and unification asks for an *actual* change in reality, at all levels, for a subtle modification of a constitutive element in each of the terms of mediation.

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²⁵ Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Mistagogia. Cosmosul și sufletul. Chipuri ale Bisericii [Saint Maximus the Confessor, Mystagogy. Cosmos and Soul. Images of the Church]*, trad. Dumitru Stăniloae, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de misiune al B.O.R., București, 2000, p. 26.

²⁶ Lars Thunberg, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

²⁷ Paul M. Blowers, *Exegesis and Spiritual Pedagogy in Maximus the Confessor. An investigation of the Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1991, p. 131.

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