

# Maximus the Confessor's "Intelligible Creation"

## Solving Contradictions on Imperishability and Corruptibility

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**ABSTRACT** Saint Maximus the Confessor's voluminous corpus constitutes a coherent and lucid philosophical and theological system, notwithstanding the existence of obscure, difficult, and at times even contradictory passages. A question stemming from Maximus' work is whether the "intelligible creation" (*noēte ktisis*) is imperishable or corruptible, which would have important implications for a number of other issues like the created / uncreated distinction, Maximus' relationship to Neoplatonism, et al. However, Maximus provides us with *contradictory passages* concerning this subject, characterizing the *noēte ktisis* as both corruptible and imperishable. While in certain passages of the *Ambigua ad Ioannem* he states that created intelligible beings move "according to corruption," excluding the possibility of natural incorruptibility for them, in other passages he states that the *noēte ktisis* possesses imperishability *by nature*, and not merely by grace. In this paper I will attempt to examine this apparent inconsistency on the basis of these two examples and to discuss which of both positions should be considered as Maximus' "primary" position.

**KEYWORDS** corruptibility; cosmology; imperishability; intelligibilia; intelligible creation; Maximus the Confessor; quality; substance

Saint Maximus the Confessor is widely credited as having achieved the most comprehensive philosophical synthesis of the Byzantine period, a coherent philosophical articulation of the ecclesial testimony. However, his voluminous *corpus* is, quite naturally, not devoid of internal problems and seeming contradictions. One of these has to do with the ontological and cosmological status of the "intelligible creation," as contrasted to the "sensible creation." A problem that has not been sufficiently addressed is that Maximus offers us *contradictory passages* concerning this subject,

characterizing the νοητὴ κτίσις as both corruptible and imperishable in different passages. While in some passages he states that created intelligible beings move “according to corruption,”<sup>1</sup> excluding the possibility of natural incorruptibility for them, in other passages (e.g., *AI 10*, 1165A) he states that the νοητὴ κτίσις possesses imperishability *by nature*, and not merely by grace. In this paper, I will attempt to examine this apparent inconsistency. What needs to be discussed is whether the coexistence of both positions merely signifies two different approaches to the same subject or rather a transfer of the created/uncreated language to the sensible/intelligible division. A second question which would arise is whether this is an intrinsic inconsistency that is not rarely found among the Church Fathers, as well as which of both positions should be considered as Maximus’ “primary” position.

I must clearly stress that this paper has a limited scope of (a) defining the problem and (b) showing a possible solution to it, mainly based on the two aforementioned representative and contradictory Maximian passages. A complete analysis based on an exhaustive survey of Maximus’ references to the subject of the intelligible realm throughout the complete Maximian *corpus* would be outside the scope of this short paper, in which I am merely addressing this metaphysical topic.

To start from the very beginning, Maximus differentiates between sensible and intelligible creation—while the uncreated God is beyond both of these. Maximus writes characteristically and in the context of his treatment of the Aeon, a form of temporality different from both ordinary time and boundless eternity:

For the whole nature of reality *is divided into the intelligible and the sensible*. There is that which is said to be and is eternal [Aeonic], since it receives the beginning of its being in eternity [in the Aeon], and that which is temporal, since it is made in time; *there is that which is subject to intellection, and that which is subject to the power of sense-perception*. The entities on each side of this division are naturally *related to each other through an indissoluble power that binds them together*. Manifold is the relation between intellects and what they perceive and between the senses and what they experience.<sup>2</sup>

Maximus clarifies that both the sensible and the intelligible realm are

1. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua ad Iohannem*, tenth *Ambiguum* (henceforth *AI 10*), MPG91, 1177B–80A.

2. *AI 10*, 1153A. Translated *AI* passages derive from Andrew Louth’s *Maximus the Confessor*, The Early Church Fathers (London, New York: Routledge, 1996).

different sides of the same created reality and that they are vitally related to each other. They embody *different accesses to the same created reality*, one access defined by sense-perception and the other by the intellect, i.e., the human person's ability to gather the individual stimuli into a consciousness that transcends them and to access reality with a fullness beyond the mere perception of individual stimuli and reaction to them. For Maximus, the sensible/intelligible distinction is a philosophical distinction that does not wholly divide its delimited realities but "binds them together through an indissoluble power" (*AI 10*, 1153A). The intelligible is very far from being "another world" as understood in mystical or esoteric contexts. With the word "intelligible," Maximus denotes all beings and all of reality that are not perceived through sense-perception, while "the entities on each side of this division are naturally related to each other." For example, in the distinction of substance and hypostasis, i.e., of the homogeneity and the particular, it is only the particular that is sensible and accessible through the senses—not the homogeneity of the particulars itself, the reality of which is merely inferred from the hypostases (or, for those that attain to a fuller access to reality, contemplated as their λόγος οὐσίᾱς). Here, the substance is, of course, intelligible—without this making it less real, merely hypothetical or simply imaginary. For Maximus, the homogeneity of the particulars is neither unreal nor hypothetical nor imaginary: it is as real as the particulars of which it is the substance. However, neither "homogeneities" nor "qualities" (e.g., to be cold, to be new, to be colored, to be moist) occupy spaces, thus making the intelligible deprived of spatiality. In order to understand Maximus' notion of the intelligible realm in the context addressed here, the reader is encouraged to think of it as the abstract philosophical albeit actually existing realm of, for example, substances, qualities and the like.<sup>3</sup>

The intelligible world, i.e., creation as perceived beyond the individual stimuli gathered through sense-perception, is also created and finite. It did have a beginning, and it will have an end—as well as everything in it:

Beginning, middle, and end are characteristics of beings distinguished by time and it can be truly stated that they are also characteristics of beings comprehended in the Aeon.<sup>4</sup>

3. There are many other aspects to Maximus' understanding of intelligible creation, e.g. the question of angels and their realm, but the above mentioned definition pertaining to ontology and cosmology should serve the purposes of this paper adequately.

4. Maximus the Confessor, *Capita theologica et oeconomica* (henceforth *GGn*), MPG90, 1085A. Translated passages from *CGn* derive from George C. Berthold's *Maximus the*

The presence of beginning, middle, and end signifies the subjection of creatures to temporality—and by temporality I mean both time *and* the Aeon. Created beings, be they “distinguished by time” or “comprehended in the Aeon,” possess these definitive marks, which act as criteria for createdness, i.e. beginning, middle, and end.<sup>5</sup> To recapitulate, everything that is created does also have a beginning and is subject to temporality<sup>6</sup>—the Aeon being the temporality of the intelligible and time the temporality of the sensible. The fact that intelligible creatures do indeed perish becomes apparent from Maximus’ treatment of the fate of universals, should all their corresponding particulars cease to exist: in such a case, the universals would cease to exist as well.<sup>7</sup>

*Confessor: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985). In the context of this particular passage, the “end” in the triad beginning–middle–end pertains to causality, the *purpose* and *goal* of each creature, its eschatological fulfillment—not to corruptibility per se. However, the fact remains that this “end” denotes a delimitation that is not present in the uncreated. God does not “have an end,” nor is end a characteristic thereof. God is the “end,” as well as the beginning (CGn, 1086D), and as such is contrasted from beings/creatures which merely *have* an end and a beginning different from their current state, be they sensible or intelligible. Disconnected from God, their “beginning” and “end,” creatures are bound to perish. Consequently, and seeing that createdness and corruption are indissolubly linked, if beginning, middle and end are characteristics of sensible creatures (“distinguished by time”) and of intelligible creatures (“comprehended in the Aeon”) alike, this denotes their corruptibility as well, should they not be redeemed. The possibility of a creature’s imperishability cannot but be linked with an, at least temporal or even Aeonic, infinity—a possibility that is explicitly ruled out by Maximus (AI 10, 1181A–1184A). Existing infinitely (spatially, temporally or otherwise) and becoming without change or alteration are two conditions which cannot coexist. For if something has been generated, then it has been changed into what it has become after its origination and into what it was not before its origination. And everything that can be changed or altered or lacks form has not achieved completeness, it cannot have its end and purpose in itself (AI 10, 1181C). As such, to “have an end” (i.e. God) outside of oneself, even a causal / eschatological one, entails the subjection to corruption and perishability, or else it would entail a kind of infinity, which would be excluded by Maximus.

5. Note that this beginning, middle, and end of beings does not only signify the *difference* from the uncreated, but also God’s indirect *presence* in them by virtue of being their Creator. See CGn, 1086D: “God is the beginning, middle, and end of beings in that he is active and not passive, as are all others which we so name. For he is beginning as Creator, middle as provider, and end as goal.”

6. AI 10, 1141B: “[T]ranscending everything that is subject to time and the Aeon. For it is not denied that such temporal beings began through generation.”

7. AI 10, 1189C–D: “We know that if particulars can perish because they are not within the remit of providence and fitting protection, then universals will perish with them (for universals consist of particulars), in this way propounding a rational demonstration that rightly leads by a reasonable retort to the truth. For if universals consist of particulars, then if the particular examples of any *logos* in accordance with which things exist and consist

However, Maximus does also speak of the intelligible creation as being naturally imperishable, contradicting my previous assertion. This intelligible creation has had a generation and beginning, as it has passed from nonbeing to being. However, this beginning and generation of the intelligible creation is *not manifest to human beings* ("οὐτε ἀρχὴν γενέσεως ἀνθρώποις κατάδηλον ἔχουσα"):

For the intelligible creation is such as to have no beginning of its coming to be that is manifest to human beings, and if it comes to be and commences and passes from non-being to being, *it does not await an end of its existence defined by corruption. For it is naturally imperishable*, having received this from God who willed to create it such. (AI 10, 1165A)

From the perspective of humanity—the only perspective that we can have—the intelligible creation *seems* beginningless and, as such, motionless. This *seeming* beginninglessness and motionlessness is not merely a relative phenomenon, but has a certain reality as well. The intelligible world, it seems, does not "await an end of its existence defined by corruption," it has been gifted with "imperishability by nature" (AI 10, 1165A). Of course, every created reality is finite, will come to an end and is by nature bound to perish, this is an axiom of Maximus'.<sup>8</sup> However, some of the intelligible beings have been granted with a partial but direct *participation* in the uncreated, and it is this that accounts for Maximus' reference to an imperishability "by nature"—for only the uncreated can possess imperishability "by nature."

I need to digress and address this matter further, for we are witnessing an apparent inconsistency. In passages like the aforementioned one (AI 10, 1165A), the "natural imperishability" of intelligible beings is introduced as a reconciliation of the *creatio ex nihilo* with the immortality/incorruptibility/imperishability of certain created intelligible beings. However, and while a number of Maximian passages indicate this, the problem is that Maximus still has other passages which directly indicate otherwise.<sup>9</sup> Apart from (AI 10, 1177 B–80A), where created intelligible beings move *according to corruption*, thus excluding natural incorruptibility, other passages inform us that, "to speak truthfully" (CGn, 1085A), beings comprehended in the Aeon as well and not only beings distinguished by

should perish, then it is quite clear that the corresponding universals will not continue to be. For the parts exist and subsist in the wholes, and the wholes in the parts."

8. According to Maximus, except for the human soul, but for different reasons that are not to be dealt with in this paper.

time—i.e. intelligible beings as well, not only sensible ones—are characterized by beginning, middle, and end, be it an eschatological redemption in God who is the end or a tendency to perish, to return from being to non-being. Intelligible beings having “an end” is clearly opposed to Maximus’ own ascertainment (*AI 10*, 1165A) that the intelligible creation is incorruptible and “naturally” imperishable, as “it does not await an end of its existence defined by corruption,” (*AI 10*, 1165A, adduced above). Of course, *Capita theologica et oeconomica* and the *Ambigua ad Ioannem* are different books written in different dates and for different purposes, and one could argue that Maximus simply changed his views in the meantime, or that he lacked in preciseness in either of the passages. However, the problem persists. It could simply be an intrinsic inconsistency on Maximus’ part, but it is not one of the subjects that the Confessor would treat lightly.

My solution to the matter is as follows: I propose that Maximus uses the term νοητὴ κτίσις with two different meanings, depending on the point of view and the context in which he is using it. According to the first meaning, he refers to the intelligible creation in general, of the intelligible creation as having an end and being able to perish, as populated by beings that “have an end” (*CGn*, 1085A), that “move according to corruption” (*AI 10*, 1177B–1180A), etc.<sup>10</sup> In this, the term νοητὴ κτίσις has a literal meaning, for it is referring to a part of κτίσις, of creation and the created beings found therein. According to the second meaning, he is referring to the νοητὴ κτίσις as populated by uncreated λόγοι as well; λόγοι of substances, but also λόγοι of qualities, in short λόγοι of anything—the λόγοι being intelligible in the sense of not being sensible. This would grant “natural imperishability” (*AI 10*, 1165A) to (parts of) the intelligible creation, insofar as the uncreated activities within it are concerned. The uncreated

9. This apparent inconsistency is not to be encountered in the case of the sensible creation, which according to Maximus has both a beginning and an end by corruption. See *AI*, 1164D–1165A: “For the sensible creation is such as to have a beginning known in coming to be, and to look for an end determined by destruction.”

10. It should be noted that Maximus clearly ascribes motion to created intelligible beings as well, although the intelligible realm *seems* motionless from humanity’s perspective. And by “created intelligible beings” I am referring to purely metaphysical notions as well, not exclusively to a religious understanding of the “intelligible realm” as being populated by, for example, angels—which can also be found in Maximus’ work, without however enhancing the lucidity of his ontology. For example, in *AI 10*, 1177B–80A, Maximus refers to the “motion of substance, quantity and quality,” which can be described as the expansion and contraction of substance as a downward and upward motion on an implicit Porphyrian tree (see Louth, *Maximus*, 207 n. 98). The motion of “expansion” and “contraction” is not only present in cases where such a thing would be obvious and expected, but in all created things that are subject to the laws of createdness (*AI 10*, 1177D).

λόγοι, God's wills, and intentions, as well as the rest of divine uncreated activities, are not exactly a part of the intelligible world, as they reside "in God," in the uncreated, beyond both time and the Aeon. However, (a) in the context of a sensible/intelligible distinction they are obviously not to be counted among the sensible beings, and (b) while they themselves are uncreated, in their interaction with created realities they emerge, being in relation to them, in the horizon of createdness. For example, while the λόγος of something's substance is uncreated but the substance itself created and intelligible, the λόγος—exactly by being a λόγος οὐσίας and directly related to the substance—*seems* as being attached to the intelligible created substance, and can be erroneously perceived as co-emerging with it. Given that the uncreated λόγος, i.e. the divine will, intention, and utterance concerning each being, is to be contemplated *through* the created intelligible substance, it can *seem* as residing in the intelligible realm, it can *seem* as being a part or principle of the substance and as such of the νοητὴ κτίσις. Seen that way, imperishability by nature is indeed characteristic of a part of the intelligible creation, i.e., of the uncreated λόγοι that animate it. Apophatic formulations allow for such seeming inconsistencies: the λόγοι can be characterized as "intelligible" due to them not being sensible, without truly being "intelligible," as they actually reside beyond both parts of the sensible/intelligible division within createdness. Thus, they can be characterized as "intelligible" in the same relative sense that God can be characterized as soul, intellect, intelligible, great, powerful, eternal, good, Father, Son, Spirit, without being anything of these, for all of these are designations that emerge and are articulated according to the divisions and distinctions of createdness.<sup>11</sup> These belong to a language, the limits of which are the limits of the created world.

Thus, the first approach to the νοητὴ κτίσις acknowledges the corruptibility and "end" of the νοητά, while the second one sees it as naturally imperishable in recognizing the imperishability of the uncreated λόγοι that are intelligible in the sense of not being sensible. Both approaches coexist without truly manifesting an intrinsic inconsistency, if approached this way. In essence, this distinction is already there: should all hypostases of a substance cease to be, their intelligible substance ceases to be as well, as there is no οὐσία ἀνυπόστατος. However, the uncreated intelligible λόγος of that substance, i.e., the intention, will, and utterance of God concerning it that is the blueprint thereof, would continue to exist "intelligibly." To put it simply: if one counts the uncreated λόγοι together with the intel-

11. See e.g. Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia*, 149.1–150.9.

ligible beings, by virtue of the λόγοι not being sensible, then the implicit core of the intelligible realm, i.e. the λόγοι, is indeed “imperishable by nature.” If, however, one does not count the uncreated λόγοι together with the intelligible beings, by virtue of the λόγοι being uncreated and the intelligible beings created, then the νοητὴ κτίσις is corruptible and, having had a beginning, it will also have an end. Both approaches can be traced in different Maximian passages. However, the second distinction is a more precise one, for the uncreated nature of the λόγοι as wills, intentions, and utterances of God is a characteristic of them that has a priority in significance over them being intelligible, i.e. not sensible.

Seeing (a) that Maximus the Confessor’s “intelligible creation” (νοητὴ κτίσις) has had a beginning and is not exempt *by nature* from having an end and from being subject to corruption and the possibility of inexistence and seeing (b) that Maximian passages indicating otherwise are most probably referring, either directly or indirectly, to the uncreated and incorruptible divine λόγοι–intentions–utterances of God, who is beyond the sensible / intelligible division, I conclude that Maximus is consistent in his use of the created / uncreated distinction and the division between the sensible and the intelligible creation, both of which he so masterfully expounds.<sup>12</sup> In my opinion, there are other aspects of Maximian thought as well, the λόγοι being the most prominent of them, which are casually and sometimes oversimplistically approached as merely “Neoplatonic” elements due to a similarity in terminology, whereas their detailed study could indicate otherwise and show both a similarity and dissimilarity to the various forms of Neoplatonism, resulting in a deeper and more unique understanding of the Confessor’s philosophy. As Torstein Tollefsen puts it, “[Maximus] received a Christian intellectual heritage that could freely express itself in this kind of vocabulary, and, strictly speaking, these are not ‘Neoplatonic terms,’ rather they are Greek words, used by the Fathers.”<sup>13</sup>

12. At the same time, this distances him from fitting into a more general Neoplatonic worldview, according to which intelligible creation would be characterized by imperishability *by nature*.

13. Torstein Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11. I am particularly grateful to Prof. Andrew Louth for sharing his thoughts on the subject of this paper in 2014.



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