

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
105 (4), pp. 90-98, 2025

On the Argument from Origin: A Note in Moral Apologetics

Sebastian MOLDOVAN

Sebastian MOLDOVAN

“Sfântul Andrei Țaguna” Faculty of Orthodox Theology,
“Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu
Email: smoldova@yahoo.com

Abstract

Human nature is a most controversial concept in the current debates regarding our destiny. A dominant anti-essentialism denounces it as ideologization and challenges its relevance. Oppositely, arguing from nature brings an apologetic tool for defenders of traditional views. Less visible is, in such controversies, the argument from origin. While universal human nature is often rejected to unlock the prospects of continuous human enhancement, the origin of each individual plays at least ambivalently: the status at birth, for example, is both challenged, in the name of “equality of opportunity” and trans-gender or queer ideologies, and it is proudly promoted, as in “born this way” slogans. The quest for origins is not only an apparently universal characteristic of religiosity, but also a focus of sciences, from physics and biology to psychology to cultural critical theories. Contemporary Orthodox theology illustrates a similar polarization regarding the meaning of nature (as within the nature-person debate), as well as a recourse, of both sides of the debate, to the origin of humans as in the ‘image of God’. I propose in this presentation a closer examination of the argument from origin and its relevance for the theological understanding of contemporary biocultural and biopolitical challenges.

Keywords

human nature, anti-essentialism, origin, image and likeness, Maximus Confessor

I. Introduction

The theme of my presentation¹ has its own origins in the debates over what our moral tradition calls behaviours or sins “contrary to nature” (*para phusin*) such as abortion, homosexuality, sex changing, and the transhumanist program. The very meaning of nature – and I refer here, and further, to human nature – is controversial, as well as the moral arguments that ascribe its normativity.²

The difficulty of the arguments from nature are at least twofold. On the one hand, a widespread depreciation in contemporary culture of the classical idea of nature as a set of inherent, defining and immutable characteristics common to a multitude of individuals. On the other hand, the meaning of this concept is disputed even within Orthodox theology today; for instance, many prestigious theologians are critical of a moral vision based on a “natural law”, which they consider foreign to the Orthodox ethos (e.g., Vladimir Lossky, Paul Evdokimov, Olivier Clement, John Meyendorff, Stanley Harakas, John Zizioulas, Christos Yannaras, Herman T. Engelhardt, etc.)³.

In what follows I reflect on these difficulties of the concept of nature, and I suggest an alternative, namely the argument from origin, and I assess its apologetic credibility.

II. The cultural discredit of nature

The contemporary discrediting of nature concerns in particular *its essentialism*, that is to say, its definitive, immutable aspect. In contrast to

¹ The present text is a slightly revised version of an online presentation at the PHAICON 24 International scientific conference, Athens, November 21-24 2024.

² An excellent assessment, in: David BRADSHAW, “What does it mean to be contrary to nature?”, in: *Christian bioethics: Non-Ecumenical Studies in Medical Morality*, vol. 29, 2023, pp. 58-76.

³ See, more extensively, Angelos MAVROPOULOS, “In Search of Common Ground: How Can Eastern Orthodox Theology Develop a Natural Law Theory?”, in: *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol 37, 2024, pp. 248-263.

a series of notions related to it - such as substance, constitution, principle, form or finality - and which admit a certain modality, change and diversity, nature has been broadly understood as a permanent, deterministic condition. Nature thus appears as *a given*, once and for all.

Obviously, such a vision hardly fits with the exuberance of current ideas about freedom, creativity, innovation, evolution, development and the like. And the desire for change and especially for progress seems inherent to the human condition, doesn't it! Beyond this strong imperative of autonomy, the contestation of the essentialist interpretation of nature invokes the irreducibility of phenomenological variability to any attempt to establish defining and, as such, normative traits: no set of traits could always be found identical in all plausible members of a species, and other traits, which may be important for some members, cannot be considered defining. Hence the suspicion or accusation that any essentialist understanding of nature is more or less ideological and oppressive⁴.

It is therefore not surprising that arguments "from nature" are on the defensive in just about every field of contemporary knowledge, including theology.

III. Difficulties and controversies in Orthodox theology

I will limit myself to mentioning here both the success and the criticism that "personalism" or "personology" enjoys in contemporary Orthodox theology in various fields (triadology, anthropology, ecclesiology, sacramental theology, moral theology and bioethics). Suffice it to mention the influential works of the late Metropolitan Ioannis Zizioulas and of the patrologist Jean-Claude Larchet, one of his most renowned critics⁵.

⁴ See, for instance, Mark J. CHERRY (ed.), *The Normativity of the Natural: Human Goods, Human Virtues, and Human Flourishing*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2015; Elizabeth HANNON, Tim LEWENS (eds.), *Why we disagree about human nature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018.

⁵ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Personne et nature. La Trinité - Le Christ - L'homme. Contributions aux dialogues interorthodoxe et interchrétien contemporains*, Les Editions du Cerf, Paris, 2011. More recently, Ernesto Sergio MAINOLDI, "Lo stato del dibattito sulla personeità nella teologia ortodossa contemporanea", in: *Lateranum*, vol

Without addressing here the validity of the pros and contras, we can note that, in anthropological context, two interrelated aspects make it difficult to invoke the moral normativity of nature.

First, the fact that human nature knows several existential or tropological regimes: an original, protological regime; a post-lapsarian, pre-Incarnation regime; a soteriological regime, *in Christ* (and in the Church); and finally, an eschatological regime. I think we can admit that, although the divine reasons that define nature (*logos tês phuseôs*, to use the terminology of St. Maximos the Confessor) do not undergo any change, its modes of actualization and manifestation know not only individual, hypostatic or ontogenetic variations (*tropos tês huparxeôs*), but also a trans-individual, phylogenetic plasticity. Likewise, not only can we identify a corruption “contrary to nature” of nature itself (more precisely, contrary to the divine *logoi* of nature) and a certain *aretological* restoration of it, but also a regime “above nature” (*huper phusin*), that which is, in fact, specific to holiness and divinization (as, for example, in St. Maximos’ *Ad Thalassium* 22)⁶. I will return to this dynamism of nature below, but it is clear that invoking it as normative raises significant problems of interpretation since all its regimes coexist, interpenetrate and condition each other in more than one way during our life.

IV. In search of the origins

At the same time, the preoccupation with origins has taken on new dimensions nowadays, even if it is often precisely with the aim of challenging and transcending them. Apart from those fields traditionally

87, 2021, pp. 337-345; Alexis TORRANCE, “The Category of «Ethical Apophaticism» in Modern Orthodox Theology”, in: *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, vol 23, 2021, pp. 41-56.

⁶ Regarding the relationship between the phylogenetic and the ontogenetic aspects of the actualization of nature through tropological modes (according to nature/against nature), one can consult the author’s studies: “The genetic mechanism of fallness. St. Maximos the Confessor revisited”, in: *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, vol. 77, no. 4, 2021, a6701; “The mutual corruption of volition and nature? A closer reading of *Ad Thalassium* 42”, in: *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, vol 79, no 1, 2023, a7895.

devoted to the research of the past, such as the historical sciences, we are witnessing a huge epistemological excavation of origins in the fields of cultural sciences (the origins of language and ideas), in psychology and psychotherapy (the origin of behaviour), in biology (the origin of life and species), anthropology (the origin of humans), medicine (etiopathology), and in the sciences of the physical universe, like geology, chemistry, and especially physics (the origin of universe).

Certainly, the purposes and heuristic methods employed are extremely diverse (e.g. narratives, etymological analysis, genealogical analysis, genetic analysis, structure of matter analysis). But whatever retroactive method is used, the epistemological force seems to be given by a principle of causality. Origin seems to contain an initial *cause*, not just a starting point; a *root*, not just a foundation; a *stemming*, not just a coming. Unlike a mere beginning, origin seems to contain a constitutive principle, an archetype, as well as a generative operating code⁷.

There is no doubt that, at least terminologically, the original concept of nature refers to that which *appears, springs up, is born or grows* (in Greek: *phusis* is derived from *phuô*; in Latin: *natura* is derived from *nascor* related to the Greek *gennaô*), and thus contains the very idea of origin. But the concept of origin also seems to offer other meanings, such as that of an authority, as coming from an author (Latin *auctor*, from *augeo*) or of a primary condition (e.g., the ‘state of nature’ as a pre-political state in the original theorists of the social contract). In this sense, the search for an origin appears not only as an attempt to identify a defining constitution, or nature, but rather as a reconstitution *à rebours* of the initial condition(s), the generative mechanisms and a possible author. Therefore, unlike nature, the concept of origin strongly implies the concepts of time and historicity.

V. Contested origins, proclaimed origins

In the contemporary cultural and political milieu, a person’s origin is treated differently: in many contexts it is strongly contested, in others

⁷ An interesting reevaluation of origins can also be found in a new philosophical trend; see, Marcello DI PAOLA (ed.), *The Vegetal Turn: History, Concepts, Application*, Springer Nature, 2024.

strongly affirmed. Phenotypical sex, for instance, is only the last of the conditions at birth put on the infamous list of those to be eliminated in the fight against social inequalities (along with former instances, like fraternal birth order, legitimacy of birth, ethnic or racial status). Civilization would progress towards the irrelevance of birth status to one's social performance. As a social role based on sexual phenotype, gender dimorphism would no longer play as decisive a role in social re-production today as it did in the past, and its preservation would be a supremacist and anti-meritocratic alibi, for some, an oppressive matrix, for others.

At the same time, we are dealing with a proud affirmation of origins, as proclaimed by the “born this way” slogans of the LGB movements, or by various movements promoting ethnic and racial identity against colonialism (e.g., Black pride, BLM, Latino or Hispanic pride, Indigenous or Native pride, etc.).

For its part, transhumanism seems unimpressed by the evolutionary origins of the current human condition and seeks to historically take over the role of natural selection to technologically produce an enhanced version, worrying nothing about the paradox of Theseus' ship⁸.

VI. An Eastern Patristic perspective

From an Eastern Patristic perspective, I illustrate the issues of origin and nature with the vision of St. Maximos the Confessor, who, in a Christian reworking of the Aristotelian dialectic of nature as potency and actuality, assigns potency to the attribute of being created “in the image” of God, and actuality to his “likeness”. About the person who realizes the course from image to likeness through the deiform virtues, St. Maximos says: “Having completed his course, such a person becomes God, receiving from God to be God, for to the beautiful nature inherent in the fact that he is *God's image*, he freely chooses to add the *likeness* to God by means of the virtues,

⁸ An Orthodox theological account of this ideology in Jean BOBOC, *Le transhumanisme décrypté: métamorphose du bateau de Thésée: essai sur le transhumanisme*, Éditions Apopsix, 2017.

in a natural movement of ascent through which he grows towards to his own beginning”. (*Ambiguum* 7)⁹

As elsewhere in his work, St. Maximos here teleologically unites the origin of existence with its end, both of them in God. It is not, however, a simple return to an original condition, but rather a fulfilment which, although he compares it to the fruits obtained by the cultivation of seeds, St. Maximos identifies it, in fact, with the access to a super-natural condition, the deification¹⁰. The relationship between nature and deification is not easy to specify, but for us it suffices to point out that St. Maximos seems to understand nature through the dynamism of the relationship between origin and finality rather than origin and finality as givens of nature¹¹.

If, on the one hand, nature as a set of endowments designate the “image”, and, on the other hand, it is defined by its finality, it means that the “image” of nature presupposes an integrity of powers as *receptive* to the “likeness” through virtues and the grace. It is precisely this integrity that is compromised by the Fall – even if not fully, nor definitively – and restored by the Incarnation, to be overcome by the deification.

But what does the malformation of nature and its powers by the Fall mean? It contains not only an ontogenetic aspect – the individual reiteration

⁹ πρὸς αὐτήν ἀπλανῶς ἄγοντα ἐξανύσας δρόμον διὰ σπουδῆς, καθ’ ὃν γίνεται Θεός, ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ τό Θεός εἶναι λαμβάνων, ὡς τῷ κατ’ εἰκόνα φύσει καλῶ καί προαιρέσει τὴν δι’ ἀρετῶν προσθεῖς ἐξομοίωσιν, διὰ τῆς ἐμφύτου πρὸς τὴν ἰδίαν ἀρχὴν ἀναβάσεώς τε καὶ οἰκειότητος. In: MAXIMOS THE CONFESSOR, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, edited and translated by Nicholas Conostas, vols. I and II, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2014; here vol. I, pp. 104-105. Father Nicholas Conostas preferred to render πρὸς τὴν ἰδίαν ἀρχὴν as “in conformity to his own beginning”, which makes sense in the context. See, also, *Ad Thalassium* 59. On the Maximian notion of divine image, see Elie AYROULET, *De l’image à l’Image. Réflexions sur un concept clef de la doctrine de la divinisation de Saint Maxime le Confesseur*, Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, Roma, 2013.

¹⁰ See, most recently, MAXIMOS CONSTAS, “«Man Became God to the Degree that God Became Man»: Maximus the Confessor and the Doctrine of Deification”, in: Paul L. GAVRILYUK, Andrew HOFER, OP, Matthew LEVERING (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Deification*, Oxford University Press, 2024, pp. 191–206.

¹¹ Cf. *Ambigua* 20 and 65; *Ad Thasassium* 22. See, John GAVIN SJ, “La triade οὐσία – δύναμις – ἐνέργεια nella visione cosmica di Massimo il Confessore”, in: *La triade dell’Essere. Essenza – Potenza – Atto nel pensiero tardo-antico, medievale e rinascimentale*, a cura di Renato DE FILIPPIS ed Ernesto Sergio MAINOLDI, Brepols, 2022, pp. 225-246.

of disobedience – , but also a phylogenetic one: we inherit powers affected, that is conditioned by death. Therefore, fallen existence itself is, to a certain extent, “against nature”. The question is, then, whether and in what way the denatured powers of nature – i.e., configured by mortality, by the passible character (*to pathêton*) and by the passions (*ta pathê*) – can be recovered for life with God – i.e. reconfigured by dispassion, by virtues and by grace. In this perspective, the *nature* in “according to nature” designates as a moral and spiritual norm the very use of the powers we are endowed with to perseverant seek and search out precisely the recovery of the integrity of nature, of the original “image”, by “likeness” through the virtues and by grace, as St. Maximus argues in *Ad Thalassium* 59.

This perspective may provide us important elements for a comprehensive Orthodox critical evaluation of contemporary ideologies, and especially gender ideologies and other cultural critiques of nature and origins, as Jean-Claude Larchet has recently proved.¹²

VII. Conclusions

In conclusion, the argument from the origin has, in my opinion, these advantages:

1) It emphasizes not only the given, but also the becoming and development, in which self-determination plays an indispensable, prominent, though not singular, role. Self-determination also requires the contribution of nature, as the sum of the endowments, faculties, capacities or capabilities that self-determination can dispose of and mobilize. This perspective allows for an understanding of personal identity as epigenetic, in both senses of the term, through temporal continuity along phases of personal transformation and through environmental conditioning of individual expressions along developmental pathways¹³. It also figures out learning and memory as constitutive to the experience of the self and her lifeworld (as, for example, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son).

¹² In his volume *Transfigurer le genre*, Éd. des Syrtes, 2023.

¹³ I mean all kinds of environments and their conditioning stimuli: endogenous and exogenous; material and spiritual; divine, cosmic, anthropic, and technological.

2) Origination also better emphasizes the ontological relationship between Creator and creature as a personal one (and not an emanationist one, for instance). No less important, this relationship of origin is teleologically oriented towards the fulfilment of existence, as interpersonal communion between the Creator and His image, which is achieved only through spiritual growth and transformation¹⁴. As already emphasized, it is a *naturally* personal relationship, since nature itself participates in this relationship, through the endowment it offers to the person, and at the same time benefits from it, through transfiguration and deification.

Last but not least, changing apologetic arguments from nature to arguments from origin implies the shifting of the burden of the proof from philosophical accounts of nature to spiritual accounts of what means to live according to “the image” towards “likeness”, that is according to a personal God and in communion with Him, without scarifying the substantial role of nature, which God offers us as the set of capabilities necessary for us as willing agents.

All of these have notable implications in addressing the *Zeitgeist* of our era and discerning its huge biocultural and biopolitical implications. The main issue seems to be not whether the limits of nature will be exceeded – since the human powers continuously grow by new experiences and knowledge - but what “images” will be the determining factors of the current and future environmental and anthropological transformations and whose “likeness” will imprint and shape the natural plasticity of the human condition.

¹⁴ It is worth noting also St. Maximos’ emphasis on the growth and transformation of Christ’s presence *kat’analogian* in the believer; e.g., *Ad Thalassium*, Intro and 40; *Capita theologica et gnostica* 2.66-71.