

dianoesis

Vol 14 (2023)

Issue 14 – The Byzantine world and its cultural surroundings



Christianity and Rationalism:

Antonis Papaoikonomou

doi: [10.12681/dia.37768](https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.37768)

Christianity and Rationalism: Maximus the Confessor vs. Descartes

Antonis D. Papaoikonomou,
*PhD, Lecturer, School of Political Sciences,
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
papaoiko@sch.gr*

Abstract

Maximus the Confessor and René Descartes were influential thinkers in their respective historical and philosophical contexts, but their philosophical orientations and concerns were distinct. Maximus was primarily a Christian theologian who integrated faith and reason within a theological framework, while Descartes was a key figure in the development of modern philosophy, emphasizing individual reason and scepticism as foundational elements of his philosophical system. This paper aims to present some aspects of their philosophy and try to find common ground in their thought.

Keywords: Rene Descartes, Maximus the Confessor, Faith, Rationality.

Introduction

In Byzantium, we find united the three main elements of European culture: Hellenism, Roman law and Christianity. Byzantine society is a direct extension of ancient society. The barbarian raids that ravaged the western part of the Empire in the 5th century did not penetrate the eastern part until the 15th century. Byzantine philosophy is an inseparable continuation of the period that precedes it. It is a whole that includes the Christian dimension together with the dimension of Greek thought, Greek speech and the Greek soul. Byzantine thought draws themes from the first post-Christian centuries from Hellenism and Christianity (Arampatzis, 2012). A question remains in Byzantine philosophy: How its autonomous expression can be understood by the theology of Byzantine philosophy? This question sprung from the very history of rationality. After a thousand years of irrationality, rational thought returns with Descartes, the revision of the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle and Kant (Mpegzos, 2012).

The Byzantine Empire emerged as the successive form of the Roman Empire, as a Christian kingdom and as the cradle of Hellenism. European rationalism as a source of enlightenment colors the approach to elements of Christian philosophy. At the beginning of the 19th century, we see the Greek preoccupation with metaphysical concerns that fit into the climate of Western European rationalism (Terezis, 1993). According to Marcos Venieris (1815-1897), intellectual of the free Greek state, the Byzantine state is the continuation of the ancient Greek request for a philosophical organization of the state as a universal state. Byzantium succeeded where Rome failed. For Sokolis (1872-1920), Byzantium offers humanity the model of the imperial idea based on Greek culture while continuing in a way the effort of Alexander the Great and reaching its completion with Christianity (Terezis, 1993). In Byzantium, one easily recognizes its universal character due to the prevalence of Greek literature in education. Patriarch Photios was a distinguished intellectual of the 9th century; he helped the Slavs of the Balkan peninsula by sending Cyril and

Methodios to teach them religion and writing. Michael Psellos was an important encyclopedist throughout the thousand-year history of Byzantium. Many of the Church Fathers were students of the sophists and rhetoricians (Britannica, 2005).

Maximus the Confessor, also known as Maximus the Theologian, was a prominent figure in the early Christian Church, and his theological contributions had a significant impact on Byzantine Christianity. He came from an aristocratic family and received an excellent education in philosophy and theology. Maximus was a civil servant before embracing the monastic life. He moved to the monastic community of Chrysopolis, near Constantinople, and eventually became a monk. This marked a significant turning point in his life (Allen & Bronwen, 2015). Maximus was involved in several theological controversies of his time, particularly the Monothelite controversy. Monothelism was a heretical belief that Jesus Christ had only one divine will and was a divisive issue in the Byzantine Church. Maximus vehemently opposed Monothelism and defended the orthodox position that Jesus had both a divine will and a human will, perfectly united in his person. His theological writings, especially his contributions to Christology, have had a lasting influence on Eastern Orthodox theology. Maximus emphasized the importance of Christ's humanity in the process of salvation (Berthold, 1997).

On the other hand, René Descartes (1596-1650) was a French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist of the Enlightenment period. He is often referred to as the "Father of Modern Philosophy" and is famous for his methodical doubt and emphasis on individual reason and rationalism. He is known for his method of doubt and the famous phrase "I think, therefore I am" (*Cogito, ergo sum*). He aimed to establish a foundation of certain knowledge through his reasoning abilities, independently of faith or theological considerations.

The purpose of the research is to compare selected works of Maximus the Confessor and Descartes about the "divine". In particular, references to Maximus the Confessor and, more importantly, the 4th part of the *Discourse on Method* will be studied. We will also focus on Descartes' method about the divine, but also the relationship between God and Man. Of

utmost significance is the contribution of the secondary literature regarding the work, the similarities and differences in the perception of "divine" between Descartes and Maximus. In short, this study will address the following questions: What are the main differences between Maximus' and Descartes' approaches to the notion of "divine" and divinity? What is the specific purpose of focusing on the nature and essence of God in the works of these authors? The present study will shed light on the way different philosophical traditions, and political, social and cultural contexts shape different perceptions regarding God and nature. In other words, the concept of the divine in patristic theology (including Maximus the Confessor) and also in modern European philosophy (Descartes) will be juxtaposed. We will also include the evolution of the perception of truth in our research objectives, not only concerning human nature but also about God's relationship with Creation.

Maximus the Confessor

Concerning the nature of God, Maximus the Confessor argued that God possesses distinguished features in terms of his essence, which do not belong to the sphere of human intellect. This happens because man understands or rather comprehends only what is subject to the criteria of the material world. God, however, is posited as infinite and transcendent of any spatio-temporal determinations (Louth, 1996). According to Maximus, divine goodness and mercy are also evident from the fact that the Christian God does not remove the free will of his creations, as his corresponding intervention in the existing world is not carried out in a strictly controlled way. Human beings remain as creations "in the image of God", free to regulate their own lives (Louth, 1996).

In addition, Maximus argued that (A) between the divine and the human, a relationship of interdependence is formed or can be formed. Moreover, the quality of this *methexis* (μέθεξις) is defined by the qualitative predicates of the higher, divine being, and, as such, is defined accordingly; (B) well-

being ($\epsilon\tilde{\upsilon}\ \epsilon\tilde{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$) constitutes an undiminished characteristic of God; (C) well-being ($\epsilon\tilde{\upsilon}\ \epsilon\tilde{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$) defines both the essence and the energy of God, even as it is impressed on the products of the divine creative power (Mpegzos, 2012. Louth, 1996).

Maximus' perspective on rationality was marked by a deep integration of faith and reason. He believed that human reason, when properly guided by faith and following the teachings of Christ, could lead to a deeper understanding of the divine and the ultimate purpose of human existence. His theological writings and philosophical insights continue to influence Eastern Orthodox theology and spirituality (Jankowiak & Booth, 2015). It should be noted that Maximus was not only a theologically knowledgeable thinker but also a systematic analyst of mathematics, astronomy and Aristotelian philosophy. He stood against the sects, even using their conceptual "tools". Of course, his choice did not distance him from his spiritual work, which was to save the Orthodox faith. To this end it is stated that Maximus the Confessor established an orthodox type of personalism, focusing strictly on the concept of "person", both in his anthropological and triadological views (Louth, 1996).

In relation to the "divine", the existence of any objective state in the space of "becoming" confirms the existence of God. However, Maximus with reasoning, which is consistent with Cartesian reflections, have noted that the existence of God-Creator is also confirmed by the fact that the Creator Himself "instils" his wisdom into the interior of beings so that any essential kind of differences between them not to constitute an antithetical but a unifying element of their coexistence.

Descartes

With the third and last argument of Descartes in favour of the existence of God, which is called "ontological", the difficulty of the French intellectual or rather of the philosophical logic to cover more complex issues of Metaphysics or Ontology is apparent at first glance. In the 4th part of the *Discourse on Method* on Method, Descartes deals with the evidence for the

existence of God and the soul and lays the foundations of his Metaphysics. This part consists of eight paragraphs (36-43) and reads like a very brief summary of the first three Meditations, although the geometrical proof of God's existence is found in the 5th *Meditation*. In this part, a series of arguments are presented, designed to throw out his present beliefs, to replace them with certainties. In this regard, he does not attempt to question his beliefs but to question the principles on which they are founded (Davis & Hersh, 1986).

In paragraph 36 Descartes states the first principle of his metaphysics. It begins from the simple to arrive at the complex, from the effects to find the causes and from the consequences to locate the foundations. He expounds first on the method and then the metaphysics. All his metaphysics is based on the exercise of thinking from the simple to the complex, from the easy to the difficult. He begins by rejecting anything that would give him the slightest doubt. The first move is to recognize as false all knowledge that could give rise to the slightest doubt, not just obvious lies. He refers to earlier as well as contemporary thinkers and modifies their approaches to explain a truth he believes to be indisputable. He calls everything into question, attempting to examine the world through a new perspective, free from prejudices and pre-existing concepts.

I decided after that to look for other truths; I called to mind the object of study of geometers, which I conceived of as a continuous body or a space indefinitely extended in length, breadth, and height or depth, divisible into different parts which could have various figures and sizes, and be moved or transposed in all sorts of ways, for geometers posit all that to be their object of study.... I noted also that there was absolutely nothing in them which made me certain of the existence of their object... yet for all that, I saw nothing in this which made me certain that a single triangle existed in the world. Whereas going back to the idea I had had of a perfect being, I found that existence was part of that idea, in the same way, or even more incontrovertibly so, that it is intrinsic to the idea of a triangle that its three angles equal two right angles, or to that of a sphere that all its parts are equidistant from its center;

and that, in consequence, it is at least as certain as any geometric proof that God, who is that perfect being, is or exists (Descartes, 2006, p. 31).

The method of doubt is a decision for Descartes, so long as he wants to assume that there is no image. This is a willful endeavour that requires practice. It is assumed that doubt is not spontaneous towards knowledge. Intellect alone does not lead to truth, the will does. Thus, the Cartesian attitude is as follows: he considers the sensory areas that appear before the subject to be unreal. He perceives this as a role since he plays the reasoning. Doubt will lead the intellect to the exit and negate scepticism.

In the same paragraph, Descartes talks about the evidential fallacy. He refers to mathematics as the foundation of truth but assumes that every proof involves an error that we do not see. In paragraph 32 he uses the example of geometry. While the world attaches certainty to the proofs of mathematics, for itself there is nothing to assure him of the existence of their object. Geometric size is what we perceive clearly from the external world. Thus, he uses the example of the triangle, the existence of which he has no certainty. Therefore, mathematics cannot be a foundation of truth, considering that there are errors in mathematical proofs. In this sense, mathematics cannot be trusted.

And because there are men who make mistakes in reasoning, even about the simplest elements of geometry, and commit logical fallacies, I judged that I was as prone to error as anyone else, and I rejected as false all the reasoning I had hitherto accepted as valid proof (Descartes, 2006, p. 28) ... *I ran through some of their simpler proofs, and observed that the great certainty which everyone attributes to them is based only on the fact that they are conceived of as incontrovertible, following the rule that I have just given. I noted also that there was absolutely nothing in them which made me certain of the existence of their object...* (Descartes, 2006, p. 31).

For Descartes, mathematics has been an explanatory model whereby we obtain knowledge, in contrast to the senses and imagination, which are inferior cognitive powers we cannot trust with the same certainty. For him, mathematics is the

science of order and measure. Everything is quantified, qualities are removed and everything is presented in evidentiary order. Descartes generalizes what Galileo first realized with the fall of bodies, and speaks of the so-called mathematization of nature. In short, nature exists only in the quantitative; it is indifferent to the qualitative advocated by Aristotelian science. He claims that all sciences can (and should) draw from mathematics a model that could lead to the truth of the natural world and man. In the *Rules for the Guidance of the Spirit (Regulae ad directionem ingenii)* he introduces the term "mathesis universalis" (universal mathematics), but this term is abandoned in all his metaphysical texts. Herein, this *mathesis universalis* is challenged. In the works of Descartes, there is development as the Canons (which he never published) lack the concept of the metaphysical. Through the development that exists between the writing of the Canons and the writing of Descartes' *Logo*, he does not question mathematical science but its ability to establish itself (Blom, 1978). Descartes realizes that something is missing to make mathematics immune to sceptics. Thus, he resorts to Philosophy and Metaphysics. It goes from the scientific to the philosophical-metaphysical level. He becomes aware that mathematics is not enough in itself. The symbols of mathematics are valid whether they correspond to something or not since even if the world did not exist the symbols would be valid. Therefore, Descartes turned against empiricism and mathematical rationalism (Cunning, 2014).

In paragraph 36 Descartes also contrasts the obvious against the dream. He uses the example of dreams which create the impression that they are real and therefore perception is a result of them. But because dreams are experiences that resemble reality, there is no criterion of distinction. So, he decides to think that everything that is happening is a dream.

For after all, whether we are awake or asleep, we ought never to let ourselves be convinced except on the evidence of our reason. And it is to be noted that I say 'our reason', and not 'our imagination' or 'our senses' (Descartes, 2006, p. 34).

However, in paragraph 43 he states the following: *Our processes of reasoning are never so clear or so complete while*

we are asleep as when we are awake (even though our imaginings in sleep are sometimes just as vivid and distinct); so reason tells us also that as our thoughts cannot all be true because we are not wholly perfect, what truth there is in them must infallibly be found in those we have while awake rather than in those we have in our dreams (Descartes, 2006, p. 34).

Perhaps Descartes' most important contribution to philosophy is his revolutionary conception of what the human mind is about. According to Aristotelian philosophy, only reason and understanding are mental properties; the senses, the imagination and the will are not simply mental properties, since they connect the mind to the objects that exist in the world (Granger, 1893). Descartes overturns this notion, counter-proposing that our sensory experience, imagination, and will are all part of the mind; they are not connected to the world. In other words, Descartes argues that our sensory experience does not lead to a complete knowledge of what exists in the world.

But to doubt means to think, and to think means to exist. These two for Descartes are one. "I think, therefore I am" is the principle of his metaphysics.

And having observed that there was nothing in this proposition, I am thinking therefore I exist, which makes me sure that I am telling the truth, except that I can see very clearly that, to think, one has to exist, I concluded that I could take it to be a general rule that things we conceive of very clearly and distinctly are all true, but that there is some difficulty in being able to identify those which we conceive of distinctly (Descartes, 2006, p. 29).

"I think therefore I exist" is the way out for Descartes. He acclaimed this assertion as an unquestionable truth. However, in the 5th part of the *Word* he is aware that there are creatures that exist but are incapable of thinking because they are not conscious of their existence. After affirming his existence, Descartes (par. 37) examines what he is, and perceives his existence only because he can think. Therefore, thought is the soul *per se*, which exists independently of all matter and is therefore separate from the body. Descartes is against the body which is the carrier of the thought.

thereby concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature resides only in thinking, and which, to exist, has no need of place and is not dependent on any material thing. Accordingly, this 'I', that is to say, the Soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body and is even easier to know than the body; and would not stop being everything it is, even if the body were not to exist (Descartes, 2006, p. 29).*

Descartes tries to extract philosophy from the body. One must forget the existence of the body to know the truth. The senses as a source of knowledge are untrue. He considers that images have an external source and that their condition is corporeality. Knowledge is detached from the tyranny of the body as imposed by Aristotelian philosophy, based on sensory experience and evidential reasoning. He aims to rid himself of the philosophical prejudices of the previous two thousand years and start afresh. Thus, he laid the groundwork for the next four hundred years of philosophy to follow.

Descartes examines the criterion of truth (par. 38). To be true, the things we perceive must be distinct and clear.

- ... After this, I came to think in general about what is required for a proposition to be true and certain; for since I had just found one such proposition, I thought that I ought also to know in what this certainty consists. And having observed that there was nothing in this proposition, I am thinking therefore I exist, which makes me sure that I am telling the truth, except that I can see very clearly that, in order to think, one has to exist, I concluded that I could take it to be a general rule that things we conceive of very clearly and distinctly are all true, but that there is some difficulty in being able to identify those which we conceive of distinctly (Descartes, 2006, p. 29).

Then (par. 39) Descartes talks about the existence of God. He makes the separation between doubt, which he considers imperfect, and knowledge, which he recognizes as more perfect. As an imperfect being the doubter, himself is an imperfect being, but he has within him the idea of the perfect. He states that doubting—and thus not being perfect himself—forces him to seek the source from which he learned to think

that something is more perfect than himself. He concludes that this source comes from a nature more perfect than himself, for it is a clear contradiction that he should conceive an idea from nothing, just as something perfect should depend on something imperfect. Since it is evident that "something" cannot come from "nothing," and one cannot obtain "something" from him/herself, this idea which contains in itself all imperfections, must have been placed there by a nature more perfect than human nature itself. Descartes considers this nature to be God. Furthermore, he believes that none of the ideas that denote imperfection can exist in God.

Descartes' argument for the existence of God is known as the ontological argument and focuses on the definition and nature of existence. Existence is considered a necessary consequence of his perfect nature. God is perfect; thus, God cannot be characterized by two natures, mental and physical.

...but because I had already recognized in my case that the nature since he of the intellect is distinct from the nature of the body, and considering that all composition is evidence of dependence, and that dependence is manifestly a defect, I concluded that it could not be one of God's perfections to be composed of these two natures, and that, as a consequence, He was not so composed; but that, if there were in the world any bodies or other intelligence or other natures which were not wholly perfect, their being must depend on His power, in such a way that they could not continue to subsist for a single moment without Him (Descartes, 2006, p. 31).

Although there are ideas concerning aesthetic and corporeal things, Descartes recognizes mental nature as distinct from corporeal nature, whose composition asserts dependence. God is not made up of two natures; that is, God has no physical nature but only a mental one. Since God is a perfect being from whom all things derive, the things which we clearly perceive (as he states in paragraph 38), are certain to be true, for the reason that God exists.

Descartes concludes that the reason people have difficulty believing that God exists is because they rely on the evidence of senses as well as of their imagination (which still derives from the senses). Sense impression and imagination can

deceive them, just as dreams do. Nevertheless, if human beings accept the existence of God, they can believe all that they perceive clearly and distinctly through their reason. God, who is true and perfect, would not have supplied them with the ability to reason if they were not in the capacity to use it to discover the truth. In this way, Descartes concludes that he discovered a method to distinguish truth from falsehood.

This is clear enough from the fact that even scholastic philosophers hold as a maxim that there is nothing in the intellect which has not previously been in the senses, in which, however, it is certain that the ideas of God and the soul have never been. It seems to me that people who wish to use their imagination to understand these ideas are doing the same as if, to hear sounds or smell smells, they tried to use their eyes. Except there is this further difference, that the sense of sight no more confirms to us the reality of things than that of smell or hearing, whereas neither our imagination nor our senses could ever confirm the existence of anything if our intellect did not play its part (Descartes, 2006, p. 37).

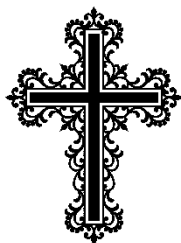
Descartes joins the group of philosophers who do not deny the power of knowledge. Although his mood includes a mood of intense scepticism, Descartes' scepticism is methodological: he uses rational arguments to arrive at certain knowledge.

Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* is a turning point in European thought and marks the transition from medieval and Renaissance to modern thought. At a time when the Church defines the course and limits of human thought, Descartes shakes the foundations of philosophy and supports philosophical thought on new and stable ground, freeing it from medieval prejudices. This is the basic innovation of Cartesian thought which prepared the way for the Age of Enlightenment.

Epilogue

It is, therefore, obvious that Maximus does not attempt to connect theology and science, as Descartes does. Science to "frame" to a satisfactory degree the truth of existence, and to

partially sympathize with the poems of theology, must follow a certain methodological way. Maximus believed in the harmony of faith and reason. He did not see faith and reason as conflicting but rather as complementary aspects of human existence. He argued that reason, when properly oriented, could lead individuals to a deeper understanding of their faith. On the other hand, Descartes' approach was characterized by methodical doubt, mathematical reasoning, and the development of a systematic method for acquiring knowledge through reason, which laid the groundwork for modern science and philosophy. Maximus the Confessor emphasized the harmony of faith and reason. He believed that human reason could be guided by faith to gain a deeper understanding of theological truths. His work was deeply rooted in Christian theology and the relationship between faith and rationality within that context. Descartes, on the other hand, is known for his method of doubt and the famous phrase "I think, therefore I am" (*Cogito, ergo sum*). He aimed to establish a foundation of certain knowledge through his reasoning abilities, independently of faith or theological considerations. So, even if the two thinkers agree on the relation that is decisive for the sentient subjects, Maximus directly and Descartes indirectly prioritize theology over science, with the difference that this priority for the Christian author lies in the mystagogic character of theology, while for the French thinker it simply constitutes - a basic and otherwise fundamental - axiom of Logic.



Bibliography

- Allen, P. & Bronwen, N. (2015). *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*. Oxford University Press.
- Arampatzis, G. (2012). *Byzantine philosophy and iconology*. Athens, Kardamitsa (in Greek).
- Berthold, G. (1997). *Maximus Confessor*. In Everett Ferguson (ed.). *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Blom, J. (1978). *Descartes, His Moral Philosophy and Psychology*. New York University Press.
- Britannica, (2005). *Cyril and Methodius*. Retrieved from <https://www.Britannica.com/Cyril and Methodius>.
- Cunning, D. (2014). *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes' Meditations*. Cambridge University Press.
- Davis, P. & Hersh, H. (1986). *Descartes' Dream: The World According to Mathematics*. Cambridge, MA
- Jankowiak, M. & Booth, P. (2015). *A New Date-List of the Works of Maximus the Confessor*. In *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Granger, F. (1893). Aristotle's Theory of Reason. *Mind*, 2(7), 307–318. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2247887>
- Mpezos, M., (2012). *Geography of Philosophy*. Athens, Papazisi (in Greek).
- Terezis, Ch. (1993). *Philosophical anthropology in Byzantium*. Athens, Ellenika Grammata (in Greek).
- Louth, A. (1996). *Maximus the Confessor (The Early Church Fathers)*. Routledge.
- Descartes, R. (2006). *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, Oxford University Press.

