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# Psychic Immortality in The Eastern Church Fathers

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**Abstract:** Is the soul immortal? We will look at how the Eastern Church fathers answer this question.<sup>1</sup> We will see the answer depends on what one means by the words *mortal* and *immortal*. For the term *θανατος*, *θνητος*, and *φθορα* have several meanings. Some of the Eastern fathers negate when speaking about the soul, while others do not. The result is that the soul is immortal in certain senses, but not in others.

## Immortality as Indissolubility

The Eastern fathers often assert that the human soul is “immortal.”<sup>2</sup> A careful examination of these statements—and related claims discussed below—shows that the immortality of the soul here spoken of is its indissolubility. The point is a recapitulation of Socrates’ argument from affinity.

The affinity argument is one of four arguments for the soul’s immortality in Plato’s *Phaedo*. The case, as laid out by Socrates, contrasts things that are visible, changeable, and dissoluble—such as organisms—with things invisible, invariable, and indissoluble—such as mathematics and other Forms.<sup>3</sup> He Socrates then asks whether the soul is more like the former or the latter.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The following is a portion of a much longer treatment of this question in my article, “On Whether the Soul Is Immortal According to the Eastern Church Fathers,” *St. Vladimir’s Quarterly* (forthcoming). Patristic citations reference Jaquest-Paul Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 161 volumes (Paris: Imperimerie Catholique, 1857-66), cited as “PG,” with the exception of Nemesius, which references *Nemesius: On the Nature of Man*, trans. R. W. Sharples and P. J. Van Der Eijk (Liverpool University Press, 2008), in the series *Translated Texts for Historians*, vol. 49.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Justin Martyr, *Apologia prima*, 44 (PG 6.396a); Clement Alexandria, *Stromata*, 5.14 (PG 9.132c-33b); Methodius of Olympus, *De resurrectione*, 1.12 (PG 18.281d); Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra gentes*, 33 (PG 25.65b); John Chrysostom, *Homiliae XXI de statius ad populum Antiochenum habitae*, 7.3 (PG 49.95); Nemesius of Emesa, *De natura hominis*, 2.38.11; Maximus the Confessor, *De anima* (PG 91.357c-59a).

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 78b-79c.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 79c and 80b.

By determining to which class the soul belongs, we can “know whether to feel confidence or fear about the fate of our souls.”<sup>5</sup> Socrates concludes the soul belongs to the latter group. Therefore, the soul is indissoluble.<sup>6</sup>

The Eastern fathers echo this argument. For example, Nemesius of Emesa affirms that the soul is immortal on the heels of a number of other conclusions, all of which show the soul’s essential simplicity:

If we have proved that the soul is neither a body nor an attunement nor a mixture nor any other quality, it is clear from this that the soul is some incorporeal substance.... It is possible to prove that the soul is immortal using the same facts. For it is neither a body, which was shown to be naturally able to be dispersed and perishable, nor a quality nor quantity nor anything else perishable, it is clear that it is immortal.<sup>7</sup>

Like Socrates, Nemesius’ case is the soul is an incorporeal substance that does not pass away, like accidents, nor dissolve, like organisms. Hence, it is immortal.

Similarly, Maximus the Confessor, when defending psychic immortality, argues the soul is bodiless (*ασωματος*), by which he means not a composite (*συνθετος*) of “many parts” (*πολυμερης*). Instead, the soul’s essence (*ουσια*) is bodiless (*ασωματος*), simple (*απλος*), and incomposite (*ασυνθετος*). From this, Maximus concludes “immortal existence attaches to that which is simple in essence.... That is why the soul (itself being incomposite is indissoluble) is immune to corruption and is immortal.”<sup>8</sup> *Incorruptible* (*αφθορα*), in the context of Maximus’ argument, means the soul is immune to decomposition because it is essentially simple.

Such a pattern of argument is common in the Eastern patristic affirmations that the soul is immortal.<sup>9</sup> Because *dissolution* or *decay* is one meaning of “mortal” in Greek (*θανατος, θνητος, φθορα*), the Eastern fathers conclude that the soul is “immortal” (*αθανατος, αφθορα*). However, a more accurate translation in such contexts is “indissoluble.” To avoid confusion, I will refer to this meaning of *αθανατος* as the “indissolubility” of the soul.

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<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 78b.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 78b-80c.

<sup>7</sup> Nemesius of Emesa, *De natura hominis*, 2.37.21-38.11.

<sup>8</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *De anima* (PG 91.357c-59a).

<sup>9</sup> See also Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione* (PG 46.12a-68a); John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei orthodoxae*, 2.12 (PG 94.924d); and Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra gentes*, 32 (PG 25.64b-65a).

## Immortality as Aseity

The second meaning of “immortal” is stronger than the previous. This meaning is it is impossible to deprive the thing of existence. Immortality in this sense is what medieval Latin writers call *aseitas*. If a thing has immortality in this sense, then existence is an essential property of its nature. Western medieval writers used aseity as a term for God’s self-existence,<sup>10</sup> and a careful analysis of the concept shows that anything existing *a se* (in itself) must not only continue to exist perpetually but must never begin to exist. For if existence is essential to the thing, the way *four-sided* is essential to *square*, then it is a formal contradiction to speak of a time when the thing did not exist. This, of course, is the basis for Anselm’s ontological argument for the existence of God.<sup>11</sup>

Socrates’ fourth argument for psychic immortality in *Phaedo* appears to argue for psychic aseity.<sup>12</sup> Do the Eastern fathers affirm psychic immortality in this stronger sense? The answer is no. This is clear in their common insistence that the soul continues to exist at the will of God.<sup>13</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius explains that the immortality we ascribe to creatures is not true immortality, by which Pseudo-Dionysius evidently means something like aseity. For no creature, not even an angel, has these attributes in itself. Rather, to whatever extent a creature is rightly called “immortal,” this attribute is the product of that creature’s ongoing participation in Life itself, namely the Eternal Life of God.<sup>14</sup> Such claims reveal two things.

First, the “immortality” of angels and of souls, discussed above, is not true immortality in the sense of aseity. The indissolubility of souls and spirits may follow from the simplicity of their respective natures, but that they exist, that their existence persists, and that their motion is preserved are all products of God willing that they participate in his Life.

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<sup>10</sup> E.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 4, 8, 7.

<sup>11</sup> See Anselm, *Proslogian*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 105c-106e.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone Judaeo*, 5 (PG 6.488b); Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 2.34.2 (PG 7.835b-36a); Methodius of Olympus, *De resurrectione*, 1.11 (PG 18.280c); John Chrysostom, *Homiliae XXI de statius ad populum Antiochenum habitae*, XI.5 (PG 49.126); John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei orthodoxae*, 2.3 (PG 94.868b).

<sup>14</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus*, 6.1-2 (PG 3.856a-57a). See also Athanasius of Alexandria, *In Illud: Omnia mihi tradita sunt a Patre*, 4; *Orationes tres adversus Arianos*, 1.6.21; Basil of Caesarea, *Epistolae*, 189.5; 292 (PG 32.689a-92c; 1033b-c); Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentarium in evangelium Joannis*, I.9, v.1:14; 4.1; 5.5 (PG 73.157d-61a; 532a; 836a); John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei orthodoxae*, 2.3 (94.865b-68a)

Second, the distinction between the immortal and the truly Immortal reveals there is something analogical about ascribing “immortality” to angels and souls. In comparison with creatures subject to dissolution, decay, and death, angels and souls are comparatively immortal, since they are indissoluble and, in keeping with their natural simplicity, God perpetually upholds their existence. But in comparison with God, who is truly Immortal, even angels and the soul are mortal and destructible.

According to Irenaeus, the proof of the Christian position that the soul partakes of Life, as opposed to having life in itself, is the fact of its creation.<sup>15</sup> This demonstrates that existence is bestowed on it from without, which means existence is not essential to its nature: “the Father of all who imparts continuance forever and ever on those who are saved. For life does not arise from us, nor from our own nature; but it is bestowed according to the grace of God.”<sup>16</sup>

## Immortality as Unturnability

In the Arian dispute, Athanasius makes clear there is a type of “corruption” (φθορά) to which the soul is subject, namely the corruption of being “turnable” (τρεπτος).<sup>17</sup> The claim is an extension of the doctrine of creation. Creatures, as entities that come into being, inevitable move from incompleteness to completeness, progressing toward their proper formation and end (τέλος). Progress toward this end is generation, while divergence is corruption.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of souls and spirits, such changes are not biological; they are spiritual. The creature exists to rest in God. Movement toward God is generation, while retreat from God is corruption.<sup>19</sup> Susceptibility to retreat from God is what is meant by the term τρεπτος, and this type of corruption is a death to which souls and spirits are subject. As Basil of Caesarea explains, “For God is life, and the privation of life is death.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 2.34.2 (PG 7.835b-36a).

<sup>16</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 2.34.3 (PG 7.836a-c). See also Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone Iudaeo*, 5 (PG 6.488b-c).

<sup>17</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Orationes contra Arianos*, 1.43; 1.51 (PG 26.100c-1c; 117b-20a).

<sup>18</sup> On the metaphysics of creation and the connection with corruption, see Nathan A. Jacobs, “On the Metaphysics of God and Creatures in the Eastern Pro-Nicenes,” *Philosophy & Theology* 28.1 (2016): 3-42

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum*, 7.1 (PG 91.1072c).

<sup>20</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *Homilia quod Deus non est auctor malorum*, 7 (PG 30:345a).

For the Eastern fathers, mortality in this sense is an inevitable byproduct of being both created and free. As John of Damascus explains, “The uncreated alone is unturnable [ατρεπτον]. But all rational beings possess free will [αυτεξουσιον]. The angelic nature, then, insofar as it is rational and intelligent, is free; while, insofar as it is created, it is turnable [τρεπτη] and has the power to persevere and progress in good or turn to evil.”<sup>21</sup> Space does not permit us to look at the case in depth.<sup>22</sup> The most relevant aspect here is this. According to the Eastern fathers, Holiness, Virtue, and Perfection, like Immortality, are native to God alone. To quote Basil of Caesarea, “For pure and intelligent and supernatural powers are called holy because they have their holiness of the grace given them by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>23</sup> For this reason, holiness is necessarily external and accidental to created natures. Creatures can only ever participate in Holiness by actively clinging to God’s Holiness. And the same is true of Virtue, Perfection, and other divine attributes.<sup>24</sup>

Now, as for what it means to cling to and participate in divine attributes, the Eastern patristic answer draws a distinction between *essence* and *energies*. This distinction has a long history,<sup>25</sup> but in its basic form, it differentiates the nature (ουσια) of a thing from the operative powers (ενεργειαι) of that nature. For example, there is a distinction between the nature of fire and its operations of heating and lighting, evident in the fact that these heating and lighting powers can be communicated to metal, but the metal remains metal. The essence-energies distinction, and the related notion of communicable energies, became central to how Alexandrian Judaism and then Eastern Christianity understood the relationship between humans and spirits. Demoniacs perform superhuman feats because they are energized by devils, while prophets, apostles, and saints serve as conduits for divine grace because they are energized by God.<sup>26</sup> The concept is central to how the Eastern fathers understand the Christian to partake of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4).

<sup>21</sup> John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei orthodoxae*, 2.3 (PG 94.868a).

<sup>22</sup> I explore the metaphysics of the case in several articles, including “Created Corruptible, Raised Incorruptible” and “On the Metaphysics of God and Creatures in the Eastern Church Fathers.”

<sup>23</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 16.38 (PG 32:136a).

<sup>24</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 9.23 (PG 32:109b-c); Pseudo-Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 10.3 (PG 3.273c); Maximus the Confessor, *De charitate centuria*, 3.52 (PG 90.1001b).

<sup>25</sup> See David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> On the biblical precedent for such concepts, see David Bradshaw, “The Divine Energies in the New Testament,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 50 (2006): 189-223.



Just as energized metal remains metal but participates in the nature of fire, so the energized holy ones participate in the divine nature via its energies, all while retaining their nature amid the metamorphosis. To quote Maximus the Confessor, “The deified man, while remaining completely human in nature, both in body and soul, becomes wholly God in both body and soul, through grace and the divine brightness of the beatifying glory that permeates the whole person.”<sup>27</sup>

Now, the flipside of this type of corruption comes to light when considering the question: If holiness, virtue, perfection, and the like are always extrinsic to created natures, and if this means rational creatures are necessarily corruptible, then it seems the threat of corruption perpetually hangs over the cosmos. For whether a free creature turns away from God or not, its created nature is inherently corruptible, which means even the unfallen and the redeemed are ever-capable of turning from God. The Eastern writers recognize this problem.<sup>28</sup> Their treatment of this issue reveals a new dimension of psychic immortality. To wit, central to Christian hope is the putting off of corruption for incorruption.

When the Eastern fathers raise the problem of the universal turnability of creatures, the driving concern is how creatures overcome this innate turnability. The Eastern fathers maintain there is only one nature that is unturnable (*ατρεπτος*), namely God’s own. Hence, the only way for a creature to change from *τρεπτος* to *ατρεπτος* is to partake of the divine nature. This is why Athanasius finds Arianism to be so dangerous. If the Son of God is a creature, then he too is turnable and cannot offer humanity the unturnable nature of God.<sup>29</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, likewise, frets that Apollinaris makes Christ’s divinity mutable and thereby undercuts humanity’s only hope of becoming *ατρεπτος*.<sup>30</sup> And Maximus the Confessor is clear, contra the Origenists, that unless the soul is able to come to rest in God and become unturnable, then the threat of falling again looms over creation.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum*, 7.3 (PG 91:1088c). See also Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 16.38 (PG 32:136a-137b); John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei orthodoxae*, 3.15, 17 (PG 94:1046c-61d; 1068b-72b).

<sup>28</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Orationes contra Arianos*, 1.43 and 1.51 (PG 26.100c-1c and 117b-20a); Alexander of Alexandria, *Epistula ad Alexandrum Constantinopolitanum*, 13 (PG 18:552c); Gregory of Nyssa, *Adversus Apollinarem* (PG 45:1124-1269, esp. 1128a); Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* (PG 91:1057c and 1069c).

<sup>29</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Orationes contra Arianos*, 1.43; 1.51 (PG 26.100c-1c; 117b-20a).

<sup>30</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis* (PG 44.300b-1c).

<sup>31</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum*, 7.1 (PG 91.1069c-72c).

Central to the Eastern patristic understanding of Christianity is that Christ offers humanity the Life of the Father (Jn 5:29, 39-40), and participation in this Eternal Life is how we escape corruption by partaking of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). This, as they understand it, is the very purpose of the Incarnation. In the Incarnation, the Son joins his divinity to humanity in order that we might be energized, becoming holy, immortal, incorruptible, and so on. The view is succinctly summarized by Athanasius' famous turn of phrase, "[The Word of God] was made man so that we might be made God [θεωποιηθωμεν]."<sup>32</sup> The view is pervasive in the Eastern fathers.<sup>33</sup> This is the transformation the Eastern fathers label *θεωσις*, or deification.

The doctrine of *θεωσις*, according to the Eastern fathers, is humanity's only hope of putting off corruption for incorruption (1 Cor 15:42). By partaking of the divine nature, creatures not only become holy, immortal, and virtuous, but the creature can hope to become unturnably so. The centrality of this hope to the Eastern Christian gospel is evident in the major Trinitarian and Christological disputes, noted above. And the same hope applies to any rational creature. As Basil points out, the perfecting (*τελειωσις*) of even the angels is their becoming *ατρεπτος* by participating in the holiness that comes to them from the Holy Spirit.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, what we find when considering this third meaning of "corruption" or "mortality" is that the soul is innately corruptible and thus mortal in this sense. The soul can indeed turn from God and thereby bring upon itself the corruption, or death, that accompanies a retreat from the source of life. But because the soul is ontologically porous and can partake of the divine nature—including its unturnability—the soul can, by grace, put off its innate corruptibility for God's own incorruption.

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What we have seen is that the terms *mortal* and *immortal* have a variety of meanings. One meaning of *mortal* is decomposition. The Eastern fathers conclude that the soul, being simple and inorganic, is immune to dissolution and is thus immortal in this sense. The second meaning of the term immortality is that the thing exists necessarily.

<sup>32</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione*, 54 (PG 25:192b).

<sup>33</sup> See also Pseudo-Macarius, *Homiliae*, 15.38 (PG 34:602); Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 9.23 (PG 32:109b-c); Cyril of Alexandria, *Quod unus sit Christus* (PG 75:1269); Maximus the Confessor, *De charitate venturia*, 3.52 (PG 90:1001b).

<sup>34</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 16.38 (PG 32:136c).



The Eastern fathers deny psychic immortality in this sense, since the creation of the soul indicates it receives existence from God as an ongoing gift. The third meaning of mortality we explored is spiritual turnability. As we saw, the Eastern fathers insist that the soul is susceptible to death in this sense. However, because the soul is created to partake of the divine nature, including divine unturnability, the soul can put off this type of mortality for divine immortality by coming to rest in God.

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