

The Philokalic View on Humility, as Illustrated by Mark the Ascetic, John Cassian, Hesychios the Priest, Peter of Damascus and Maximus the Confessor, with Preliminary Considerations on the Platonic and Neoplatonic Virtue of Modesty

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**THE PHILOKALIC VIEW ON HUMILITY, AS ILLUSTRATED
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VASILICA MUGUREL PAVALUCA¹

*“For the humble man never falls:
Where, indeed, can he fall to?
If he regards himself as lower than all things?”.*
Symeon Metaphrastes (10th-11th c.)
(*Philokalia*, V3, 346)

Abstract

I discuss here how the platonic and neo-platonic virtue of modesty is transformed into the virtue of humility in Mark the Ascetic, John Cassian, Hesychios the Priest, Peter of Damascus and Maximus the Confessor. The comparative analyses offer a wide view over the main similarities and differences between the ancient Greek and the Philokalic virtues related to modesty and humility. I conclude that the Philokalic counterparts show a specific kinship with the Orthodox spirituality of our days.

Keywords: *Modesty, Humility, Mark the Ascetic, John Cassian, Hesychios the Priest, Peter of Damascus, Maximus the Confessor.*

General considerations on the topic and methodological approach

For all the writers of the *Philokalia*², humility plays a relevant role on the purifying path to attaining true virtues and the knowledge of God.

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Whether humility is just a means or an end to pious human existence is a question that cannot be answered immediately. What is certain, however, is that without humility there is no attainment of other virtues. Thus, humility in *Philokalia* constitutes both the prerequisite and the goal of other virtues.

The Philokalic Fathers under discussion in this essay have been selected because they place the virtue of humility at the core of spiritual advancement and each of them has a different emphasis on the virtue of humility. The Fathers named in the title are representative for the understanding of humility in the *Philokalia*, but due to the partial treatment of this topic, our work does not claim to be exhaustive.

The particular consideration of Platonic and Neoplatonic modesty is justified because of a certain kinship with the Philokalic thinking about humility. The association of Philokalic humility with Platonic and Neoplatonic modesty is based on a certain kinship with regard to the understanding of virtue and spiritual knowledge, which express both an internal transformation in human existence and a knowledge of the divine.

The essay consists of three parts:

- The first part deals with the virtue of modesty³ in Platonism and Neoplatonism;
- The second part is the analysis of “humility” in the writings of Mark the Ascetic, John Cassian, Hesychios the Priest, Peter of Damascus and Maximus the Confessor;
- The third part contains the conclusive remarks on similarities and differences between Platonic or Neoplatonic modesty and Philokalic humility.

² *Philokalia* 1977. The present text employs the English translation of the Greek version published at Athens between 1957 and 1963 by the Astir Publishing Company. The Editorial Board of the Eling Trust prepared the final version of the text used here. The Editorial Board consists of G. E. H. Palmer, Dr Philip Sherrard and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware. The present Philokalic text is also available online at: <https://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/Philokalia.pdf> (accessed November 10, 2020).

³ “Why modesty and not humility?” will also be a subject of the first chapter.

1. Modesty in Platonism and Neoplatonism

Virtue plays a vital role in Platonism and Neoplatonism, because it defines the state of human existence in its ascension towards knowledge. We shall show below how Plato, Plotinus and Iamblichus define and describe virtues.

Our main references regarding the virtue of modesty in Neoplatonism will include only Plotinus and Iamblichus. The reason for this lies in their positions representing two different Neoplatonic directions with regard to the virtue of modesty.

A. Modesty in Platonism

Plato (428/427-348/347 BC) narrates in *Symposium*, through the voice of Aristophanes, the story about the dividing of man's androgynous nature. Because the men had become too strong and posed a threat to the gods, Zeus said:

"Methinks I have a plan which will *humble* their pride and improve their manners; men shall continue to exist, but I will cut them in two and then they will be diminished in strength and increased in numbers; [...] he (man) would thus learn a lesson of *humility*." (Plato, *Symposium*, 1665)

In Platonic philosophy, humility cannot be understood as a virtue separated from modesty, because it does not have an independent status. The simple fact that the Old Greek term "*ταπεινοφροσύνη*" (humility in the *Philokalia*) does not appear in Plato's writings indicates that Plato did not understand humility in its philokalic meaning. To Plato, as we can see in the case of *Symposium*, humility expresses a humiliating action from the outside by which the humiliated subject learns his lesson. As a result, humility aspects must be seen and addressed through the virtue of modesty (and its closest term: "temperance") as the closest related virtue.

Platonic modesty has no correspondence in the Christian Philokalic unselfishness and self-denial, but it is rather understood as modesty based on temperance and courage (*σωφροσύνη και ἀνδρεία* – *Symposium*,

219 d-e). On the other hand, there is a clear correspondence between Philokalic humility and Socrates' attitude to knowledge as an act of knowing the limits of the self. Therefore, two directions are to be followed here: Plato's understanding of modesty as temperance and Socrates' interpretation as (self)knowledge.

a. Modesty

In his dialogue *Charmides* Plato addresses the matter of temperance discussing this question: "What is temperance?". Among the various definitions provided, such as quietness or minding one's own business, there are two definitions of interest for this analysis: *modesty* and *awareness of what one knows and what one does not know*.

The dialogue between Socrates and Charmides unfolds in this context as follows: "Then once more, Charmides, I said, fix your attention, and look within; consider the effect which temperance has upon yourself, and the nature of that which has the effect. Think over all this, and, like a brave youth, tell me – What is temperance? After a moment's pause, in which he made a real manly effort to think, he said: My opinion is Socrates that temperance makes a man ashamed or modest, and that temperance (*σωφροσύνη*) is the same as modesty (*αἰδώς*)" (*Charmides*, 85). The reference in *Charmides* points to "*αἰδώς*", according to the Greek goddess of shame, respect and modesty, which is understood among the virtues as demureness stemming from modesty, and not to "*αἰσχύνη*", which is a term translatable as shame, mostly used in the sense of disgrace or dishonour (*Symposium*, 1651, 1658). Socrates leads the dialogue in the following lines against equating temperance with modesty. He reaches the conclusion that temperance is always good, whereas modesty may or may not be good (*Charmides*, 86), dialectically oscillating between the understanding of temperance as self-restraint, on one hand, or as lack of courage, on the other hand. The dialectics of modesty – being and not being temperance by definition – concerns in Plato's thinking not only the virtues or the sensible world in their participation or non-participation in the ideal forms, but it is predicated upon the distinction between being and not-being, and implicitly upon the existence of not-being itself. Theaetetus

remarks the strange situation of being and not-being he and the Stranger are involved in. The Stranger replies:

“Strange! I should think so. See how, by his reciprocation of opposites, the many-headed Sophist has compelled us, quite against our will, to admit the existence of not-being.” (*Sophist*, 1527)

In the particular case of modesty and temperance, the main difference between the two consists of participation in being and not-being. Whereas temperance participates in being, modesty participates in both being and not-being. Socrates’ argumentation is based on an absolute acceptance of Homer’s saying:

“Modesty is not good for a needy man.” (*Charmides*, 85)

The expression “needy man” is accepted here apodictically as an absolute argumentation, although there is no discussion about what kind of need is referred to. Assuming that the “needy man” lacks something that he does not possess and has to acquire it dynamically (actively), a possible interpretation lies in the difference between “temperance” as controlled movement of the soul, which does satisfy the needs of the man, but in a controlled manner, and “modesty” as less dynamic fulfilment of the needs. This interpretation can be supported by the assertion that temperance, self-restraint, and manliness (courage) (*Symposium*, 1673), belong together and are mutually reinforcing, or complementary.

This assessment becomes clearer in *The Statesman*, where it seems that modesty, as virtue, needs one more characteristic: courage. The Stranger takes the following view:

“And then, again, the soul which is over-full of modesty and has no element of courage in many successive generations is apt to grow too indolent, and at last to become utterly paralyzed and useless” (*Statesman*, 1625)

Therefore, the dynamic character of modesty is achieved through the courage, which completes modesty and frees it from paralyzing idleness. On the other hand, courage cannot be complete without

modesty “because courage, when untampered by the gentler nature during many generations, may at first bloom and strengthen, but at last bursts forth into downright madness” (*Statesman*, 1624). Neither modesty nor courage are able to lead to an attitude of virtue. They both need to complete each other or meet in the middle, avoiding the extremes, such as idleness (modesty without courage) and boldness (courage without modesty).

b. Socrates' knowledge

The second definition we address here, the one given to temperance by Charmides, is “to know what man knows and what man does not know” (*Charmides*, 91). This definition is tantamount to “self-knowledge”. The treatment of this point coincides with the announced aspect of self-knowledge in Socrates' attitude. The key word for this second aspect is temperance understood as modesty. Socrates seems to outline in the *Apology* the difference between opinion and real knowledge. In the context of his self-defence, being accused of pretending to be wise, he says:

“And I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and by his answer he intends to show that the wisdom of men is worth little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name by way of illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing.” (*Apology*, 60)

Socrates seems to confine his quality of being wise only to being aware of his limitations, respectively of his own insufficient knowledge. Modesty defines his attitude about knowledge. This kind of modest attitude is actually determining for the entire Platonic thinking. Knowledge, in Plato's thinking, must be always accompanied by modesty (alongside courage). This idea underlies Platonic dialogues. Modesty and the self-restraint create propitious atmosphere for conducting a dialogue.

The question, which arises here: “how can one bridge the gap between knowledge and self-knowledge?”, is justified because being modest about the limitations of one's own knowledge does not

necessary lead to self-knowledge. The introspective atmosphere is already present by questioning one's own knowledge, but this is yet self-knowledge.

In *The Sophist*, Plato compares this process with a medical treatment:

"For as the physician considers that the body will receive no benefit from taking food until the internal obstacles have been removed, so the purifier of the soul is conscious that his patient will receive no benefit from the application of knowledge until he is refuted, and from refutation learns modesty; he must be purged of his prejudices first and made to think that he knows only what he knows, and no more." (*Sophist*, 1519)

The comparisons with the doctor treating a body and with the purifier treating a soul determine the knowledge as an inner process, which affects the entire being. Modesty begets in this context not only conscience about one's own knowledge limitations, but also the virtuous quality of self-restraint because it leads to a specific attitude. In the virtues, one has to seek the link between knowledge and self-knowledge, because knowing what one knows and what one does not know means knowing the self. The virtue of modesty distinguishes in this case knowledge from not-knowledge.

Moreover, Socrates' argument goes beyond this. He does not just distinguish between knowledge and not-knowledge, but he asserts that he does not know anything at all (with certainty). His superiority is therefore recognizable in the strength of admitting it.

"So, I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good (καλὸν καγαθὸν), I am better off than he is, – for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows; I neither know nor think that I know." (*Apology*, 59)

Modesty together with courage seems to make the difference between false knowledge about one's own self and true knowledge of not-knowing.

As K. Popper received an honorary doctorate in 1979 from the University of Frankfurt am Main, he held a lecture entitled "About

knowing and not knowing”⁴. Popper spoke on this occasion about Plato’s apology of Socrates as the most beautiful philosophical writing that he had ever known (Popper 1989, 42). In this context, Popper interprets Socrates’ attitude in the fallibilist manner and praises him mostly because of his epistemic modesty. The well-known inscription in the temple of Apollo in Delphi (*Γνωθι σεαυτόν*) is in Popper’s opinion also a warning for a modest attitude in knowledge, which means: “be aware of how little you know” (Popper 1989, 43). As a result, the Platonic motto of self-knowledge is not a purely epistemic warning regarding the self, but above all an ethical warning about things concerning behavior and attitude in knowledge, about modesty.

In conclusion, one can call modesty a decisive virtue, because it conditions both virtues: temperance (in attitude and in knowledge) and wisdom (Hazlett 2012, 210). Insofar as modesty means the disposition to keep the middle ground between intellectual presumption and intellectual faint-heartedness, neither overestimating mere opinion as knowledge nor belittling valuable insights, it represents an absolute condition for wisdom.

B. Modesty in Neoplatonism

In his Trinitarian treatise, Augustine has a chapter entitled: “They are proud who think they are able, by their own righteousness, to be cleansed so as to see God”. He means in this context the Neoplatonism and especially Plotinus, who, according to Augustine, claims that he is insightful enough to be able to see the reality beyond all creation and touch the light of unchangeable truth⁵. Augustine sees in this

⁴ Über Wissen und Nichtwissen.

⁵ *On the Holy Trinity*, IV, 15, in “Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers”, Series I/Volume III/Doctrinal Treatises of St Augustin, *Wikisource*, translated by Arthur West Haddan. Text: “There are, however, some who think themselves capable of being cleansed by their own righteousness, so as to contemplate God, and to dwell in God; whom their very pride itself stains above all others. [...] For these persons promise themselves cleansing by their own righteousness for this reason, because some of them have been able to penetrate with the eye of the mind beyond the whole creature, and to touch, though it be in ever so small a part, the light of the unchangeable truth; a thing which

Neoplatonic claim to reach the vision of God through one's own strength an absolute proof of arrogance and lack of modesty. Humility, as one encounters it in the thinking of Augustine, is a consequence of the Christology and Christ's crucifixion; that is why one seeks vainly for such an understanding in Neoplatonism⁶. The human desire for salvation does not mean for Plotinus one's abandonment to faith, accepting theological postulates without question. Plotinus' method follows, likely the Platonic dialectics, the investigation through man's spirit.

a. Plotinus (204/205-270 AD)

Plotinus understands modesty as an accompanying virtue for his research method. Although modesty is not an end in itself, it is necessary for a clear vision in the scientific and dialectic research. Modesty brings a certain spiritual balance, which is supposed to ensure the quality of philosophical investigation:

"You will note all through how our form of philosophy inculcates simplicity of character and honest thinking in addition to all other good qualities, how it cultivates reverence and not arrogant self-assertion, how its boldness is balanced by reason, by careful proof, by cautious progression, by the utmost circumspection." (Plotinus, *Second Ennead*, L8, C14)⁷

they deride many Christians for being not yet able to do, who, in the meantime, live by faith alone". https://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Nicene_and_Post-Nicene_Fathers:_Series_I/Volume_III/Doctrinal_Treatises_of_St_Augustin/On_the_Holy_Trinity&oldid=6231126 (accessed November 25, 2020).

⁶ Cf. King 2005, 226: "Augustine offers a psychological explanation: the pride (*superbia*) of the Neoplatonist philosophers prevented them from recognizing the truth, or, having seen it, from accepting it. They could not accept humility, either in God or the Second Hypostasis to become flesh and voluntarily lower itself to the human condition or in themselves".

⁷ Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, translated by S. Mackenna a. B. S. Page (It is the same text published by Encyclopaedia *Britannica* in 1952), *Second Ennead*, L8, C14. https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0204-0270,_Plotinus,_The_Six_Enneads,_EN.pdf (accessed November 25, 2020).

In his understanding of the intellect, Plotinus sees modesty as a prerequisite for the harmony of the spirit to become alike godly intellection. The condition of modesty as an intellectual virtue is constituted implicitly by the accompaniment of courage. One can recognize the Platonic path in Plotinus' words:

"It is that you find in yourself, or admire in another, loftiness of spirit; righteousness of life; disciplined purity; courage of the majestic face; gravity; modesty that goes fearless and tranquil and passionless; and, shining down upon all, the light of god-like Intellection." (Plotinus, *First Ennead*, L5, C5)

Fearlessness (courage), quietness and dispassion together constitute the modest being. Dispassion is a preventive characteristic against drifting and the distraction of the spirit in its ascent.

Nevertheless, there are some passages where Plotinus seems to enhance the virtue of modesty by adding an element of humility. The soul, in the process of directing its act towards the principle of the intellect, must be in self-restraint and impassivity in order to let the Intellect inside. One of the meaningful texts about this matter:

"On this principle, the supreme Rectitude of the Soul is that it directs its Act towards the Intellectual-Principle: its Restraint (σωφροσύνη) is its inward bending towards the Intellectual-Principle; its Fortitude is its being impassive in the likeness of That towards which its gaze is set [...]." (Plotinus, *First Ennead*, L1, C6)

By conditioning the inward workings of the soul through "restraint" and "bending" Plotinus left a door open to a humble attitude of the soul in its ascent. Despite this tendency in Plotinus' thinking, his understanding of modesty remains mainly within the framework of scientific virtue, thereby maintaining the spirit within the confines of the research method. Even Plotinus' apophatic method applied as negation of the main designations (the one, the good, the first, the principle) of the One does not lead to the proximity of a humility thought (determined by the ineffability of the One).

The acceptance of the First Principle, the Absolute One, which is transcendent to all entities, is the most important characteristic of all

Neoplatonic authors of late antiquity (Perkams *et al* 2006, 13)⁸. There is a clear parallel between Plotinus and Proclus (412-485 AD) with regard to the One as transcendent (without multiplicity and unrelated). A relevant difference between Plotinus (or Proclus) and Iamblichus, however, consists in the modality of the transcendence of the One. Since Iamblichus also introduces a causality (Perkams *et al* 2006, 14)⁹, the relational aspect also changes.

The tendency we find in Plotinus' thinking, where one can identify a slight humble disposition of the soul in its ascent, becomes clearer in Iamblichus' thinking.

b. Iamblichus (240/245-320/325 AD)

The virtue of modesty in Iamblichus' thinking, which could coincide with the term "humility", is particularly observable in his understanding of prayer. Prayer plays a relevant role in Neoplatonic theology because it embodies the divine presence in the human mind. The attitude in prayer must implicitly be one of at least modesty or temperance, because one acknowledges the desire to unite with the gods and recognizes their superiority. Iamblichus stresses this lowly condition of the praying man, who perceives himself before the gods as nothing or unworthy. The consciousness of one's own "nothingness" (*οὐδένεια*) is not a characteristic of denying the self, but rather a philosophical and practical one, which enables the process of theurgy (Feichtinger 2003, 136)¹⁰. Iamblichus says in this matter:

"The consciousness of our own nothingness, if one judges it in comparison with the gods, makes us naturally turn to supplications; and by the practice of supplication we are raised gradually to the level of the object of our supplication,

⁸ "Das wichtigste verbindende Merkmal aller neuplatonischen Autoren in der Spätantike besteht zweifellos im Theoriestück der Henologie".

⁹ Christoph Horn mentions here the term "two ones" (zwei Einen), which should apply to Iamblichus' understanding of the One: One transcendent and One causal.

¹⁰ "*Οὐδένεια* and humilitas: Nature and Function of Humility in Iamblichus and Augustine".

and we gain likeness to it by virtue of our constant consorting with it [...]" (Iamblichus, *De Misteriis*, I. 15-16)¹¹

The self of man can only ascend through a power, which is, at the same time, the goal of the self. In the supplication itself lies the recognition of own nothingness. Being nothing means for Iamblichus literally that one can-do-nothing without divine power.

The concept of theurgy is a new aspect that Iamblichus introduces to Neoplatonism. While Plotinus thinks that the salvation of the soul from its misery and from the material world is possible only by striving for spiritual knowledge, Iamblichus points to acts by which man could approach the divine realm. Iamblichus' theurgist way of salvation is not a redemption of the human soul accomplished by its own strength or its own virtue, but by the will and power of the gods; that is why, in his view, theurgy is imperative. Thus, the implicit state of humility in prayer in Iamblichus' thinking does not simply play a mediating role for good research as in Plotinus' thinking, but it also implies spiritual availability, whereby the gods inhabit the human spirit. Iamblichus reaches this view of humility in the context of considering theurgy as an independent act, which is not caused by the inferior human mind, but by the mediating symbols:

"For even when we are not engaged in intellection, the symbols themselves, by themselves, perform their appropriate work, and the ineffable power of the gods, to whom these symbols relate, itself recognizes the proper images of itself, not through being aroused by our thought. [...] Hence it is not even chiefly through our intellection that divine causes are called into actuality." (Iamblichus, *De Misteriis*, I. 15)

By making the process of the ascension of the human soul independent from the human intellect, Iamblichus decentralizes soul's knowledge as the main process of divinization and defines the human being in its inferiority by not contributing to the "accomplishment of divine transactions" (117). By negating the intellectual strength of human knowledge, Iamblichus reaches a stage of modesty as virtue that

¹¹ See also Iamblichus 2003, 59-61.

goes beyond the epistemic character and comes closest to the Philokalic understanding of humility. Iamblichus himself asserts:

“Thus, divine purity does not come through right knowledge, in the way that bodily purity does through chastity, but divine union and purification actually go beyond knowledge.” (117)

Both Plato and most of the Neoplatonist thinkers consider virtue, and implicitly humility or modesty, as an exclusive act of the intellect (except Iamblichus), which leads to the divine union with the gods. This Platonic and Neoplatonic view, actually based on the opinion that only the intellect is the matter of soul, leads to the most important differences between Platonic or Neoplatonic modesty and Christian humility, which will be addressed in the final part of this essay.

2. Humility in the *Philokalia*

The Philokalic Fathers use the term “humility” (*ταπεινοφροσύνη*) very often. In most cases, this term means humility as recognition of one’s own lowliness among the creatures of God. However, there are also other aspects implied in the Philokalic understanding of humility.

When the term “humility” is used, it designates at the same time awareness of being not humble enough, as well as a certain inner strength (grace) to progress in the virtue of humility. As modesty can depend on a certain non-awareness of one’s own modesty in order to remain modest, humility also presupposes that one does not declare one’s own humility. The only prior knowledge of the state of humility consists of denying its existence in order to become humbler.

“Humility does not feel humble. On the contrary, seeing in itself excessive egoism, it persistently seeks to uncover all ramifications of it. In addition, the more it (humility) searches, the more it realizes that it will have to fight for a long time. Saint Macarius the Egyptian, the bearer of signs and spirit, to whom the church has given the epithet ‘the great’ because of his great virtues and especially his deep humility, says in one of his sublime, holy and truly spiritual homilies that even a pure person, a perfect one, as we would say, still has a tendency to arrogance.” (Briantschaninow 2010, 2)

The absolute criterion of humility and, at the same time, the common basis for humility in *Philokalia* is Jesus Christ. All aspects of Christ's earthly life, from incarnation to crucifixion, death and resurrection, are landmarks and examples of the concept of humility in the *Philokalia*. The relation of the *Philokalic* authors to the person of Christ is secondarily an analogous connection of imitation (of Christ) and primarily a direct connection for the attainment of the Spirit promised by Christ. This continuous struggle of denying one's selfishness and even the self-preservation begins as a decision of goodwill, but it is carried out only by God's grace.

The most popular biblical text about humility is the *Philippians'* Hymn on the humility of the Logos:

"(5) Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, (6) who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, (7) but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men (8) and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." (*Phil 2, 5-8*)¹²

The absoluteness of divine humility in the person of Christ, who as God humbled and emptied himself for the love of humans, provides a continuous starting point for the conception of humility in the *Philokalia*.

On the one hand, the state of humility is meant to combat pride, which tries to place one's ego in the center of one's life. Maximus the Confessor considers pride to be a passion of the spirit and a dangerous disease (Maximus the Confessor V2, 97), which deeply affects the spirit. As the oldest of the sins, pride seizes both body and soul, making the human being almost unable of recognizing its own condition.

On the other side, humility is in the *Philokalia* a dynamic state of the whole person as body and soul, which engenders and sustains the other virtues. Regardless of which virtue one attains or what virtue one wishes to cultivate, all practicing virtues must be accompanied by humility. Humility as a reaction to the oldest sin (pride) of creature's existence, is the only virtue by which one recognizes the source of

¹² "Philokalia", Hesichios the Priest, *On watchfulness and holiness*, V1, 176.

human virtue: the grace of God and not man himself. In this sense, this work will analyze humility not only as a virtue in itself, but more as a cause and criterion for other virtues.

Despite the fact that humility is viewed uniformly by all Philokalic Fathers and is introduced as an accompaniment to all virtuous actions, the Philokalic writers sometimes place different degrees of emphasis on humility. With this in mind, our study addresses some particular aspects of humility in the thinking of the Fathers named below, who stressed these aspects.

Consequently, we will analyze in the following pages the function of humility in the *Philokalia*, respectively how humility sustains other virtues and what virtues it leads to. An exhaustive treatment of the term “humility” along with all its philosophical and theological implications is beyond the scope of this analysis.

The following aspects and Fathers will be considered here:

- A. The self-denial characteristic of humility (St. Mark the Ascetic),
- B. The purity of the heart as consequence of real humility (St John Cassian),
- C. The humility leading to spiritual knowledge (St Hesychios the Priest),
- D. The dynamism of humility (St Peter of Damascus),
- E. The humility as gentleness and freeing state of intellect (St Maximus the Confessor)

A. Mark the Ascetic (5thc.): The self-denial characteristic of humility

Mark the Ascetic defines humility as the opposite of self-justification or pride (Marc the Ascetic, *On the spiritual law*, V1, 119)¹³. When man lives his life according to the principles of nature, the devilish temptation of self-justification takes place through nature. He compares this to a house that is built by the devil in one’s soul:

¹³ “Just as water and fire cannot be combined, so self-justification and humility exclude one another”.

“Do you want the destruction of this house of evil which the devil builds in your soul by continually using as stones various plausible or senseless pretexts, whether material or mental, and by constructing its foundations out of thoughts of pride? If this is what you really want, keep the humility of the Lord in your heart and never forget it.” (*Letter to Nicolas the Solitary*, VI, 155)

Self-justification is based upon earthly life arguments, which are basic human aspirations, such as worry about tomorrow’s food or clothes¹⁴, or savings for a comfortable life. These life arguments carry their weight in the nature, which must be overcome.

The question here is “How can such thoughts be thoughts of pride?” For the Philokalic Fathers, pride does not mean simply boasting about one’s virtues or considering oneself better in comparison with his neighbor. The comparison is usually made with Christ himself. That is why pride does not only include elementary qualitative comparisons with the neighbor, but it also includes the self-justification of existence. Pride in its original form is a state of separation (from God) and in his separation from God, man thinks that he depends on himself for his salvation. The original contemplation of the self by divine otherness has now disappeared. As a result, everything that man does for his existence separate from God is a consequence of the original sin of pride and carries with it the sin of pride. Everything that relates to the self is an attempt to justify oneself in a separate state from divine otherness. From a theological standpoint, this is the deepest form of sin against the divine Trinity as a community of love.

Nonetheless, humility does not mean self-damnation, but a recognition of the state of separation from God. This is the only way that leads to the attainment of God’s grace:

“Humility consists, not in condemning our conscience, but in recognizing God’s grace and compassion” (*On those who think they are made righteous by works*, VI, 134)

In order to receive the grace of God one has to recognize oneself as a child of God and this is only possible through the incarnate God. As a

¹⁴: “[...] not claiming for himself in return any human advantages: glory, honor or praise, or the pleasures of food, drink or clothes”.

result, one must live in the humility of Christ in order to become sister or brother of Christ and to be allowed to ask the Abba for the Holy Spirit. The last part of the text quoted above (FN 36) indicates that man should keep the humility of Christ in his heart. This reference must be understood literally, because he does not speak analogously (*like* the humility of the Lord), but refers to the actual humility of the Lord. In his humility Christ does not seek his own, but the benefit of others. This kind of self-denial is not asserting an absolute denial as nothingness, but a longing for the humility and the cross of Christ, a bringing of the humility of Christ into the present and in one's own life story, which results in the redemption of the soul:

"Laboring much in prayer and all-night vigils, it uproots the causes of evil within itself through humility and confession before God and our neighbor. In this way it begins to regain the state of watchfulness and, illumined with divine grace and understanding of the Gospels, it perceives that no one can become a true Christian unless he gives himself up completely to the cross in a spirit of humility and self-denial, and makes himself lower than all, letting himself be trampled underfoot, insulted, despised, wronged, ridiculed and mocked; and all this he must endure joyfully for the Lord's sake, not claiming for himself in return any human advantages: glory, honor or praise, or the pleasures of food, drink or clothes." (*Letter to Nicolas the Solitary*, VI, 149-150)

Self-denial is an absolute renunciation of one's own self, but not a nihilistic one because it pursues forgiveness of sins and salvation of soul (*On the spiritual law*, VI, 119)¹⁵. The denial of self means to the humble person his own cross and sacrifice, thereby participating in the cross and sacrifice of Christ.

B. John Cassian (4th-5th c.): The purity of the heart as consequence of real humility

The heart of the God-seeker must first be purified so that he is not concerned with his own self but with God. The heart, which is to be purified, constitutes the center of the human person and does not refer

¹⁵"He who seeks forgiveness of his sins loves humility, but if he condemns another, he seals his own wickedness".

just to body or soul. The connection between body and soul is so close in the *Philokalia* that these two form together a unit, which can only be thought as a whole. For example, the purity of heart cannot be attained without chastity and control of the body. John Cassian says:

“[...] that we cannot fully acquire the virtue of purity unless we have first acquired real humility of heart. And we will not be granted true spiritual knowledge so long as the passion of unchastity lies hidden in the depths of our souls.” (John Cassian, *On the eight vices*, V1, 77)

The real humility of the heart is not only an answer to a proud man, but also an answer to the bodily sins, in this case unchastity. Because of the fact that the bodily reality cannot be separated from the spiritual reality, humility constitutes itself the answer to the human action in its wholeness.

The heart is to be purified because out of it come all the evil thoughts. John Cassian shows the necessity of purifying the heart based upon the quality of the heart, which is the source of the human thoughts and acts (V1, 75). One must “guard the heart from base thoughts for, according to the Lord, out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, unchastity and so on (Matt.15, 19)” (V1, 75).

Humility guards the heart because where one’s treasure is, there one’s heart will be also (Matt. 6, 21). Guarding the origins of every virtue, actual or potential, means guarding the whole being along with its virtuousness. In the opposite case, the pride in the heart destroys any kind of virtuousness:

“Just as a deadly plague destroys not just one member of the body, but the whole of it, so pride corrupts the whole soul, not just part of it. Each of the other passions that trouble the soul attacks and tries to overcome the single virtue which is opposed to it, and so it darkens and troubles the soul only partially. But the passion of pride darkens the soul completely and leads to its utter downfall.” (V1, 92)

How does humility purify the heart? Becoming aware of one’s own powerlessness and becoming humble leads the heart away from its “natural” instinct of concentrating on its own self. Escaping one’s own self means that it turns into a selfless heart, whose interests are no more

centered on personal benefit. In other words, it is a sacrifice of the self in order to be inhabited by the grace of God. The primary and main achievement of the real humility is admitting the act of salvation as an exclusively divine work. If one excludes any trace of one's own merit, then pride can no longer enter the heart. That is why such a struggle for the purity of the heart will always be gained through and by the grace of God. John Cassian encourages the efforts for an ascetical life, beginning with the humility of a pure heart. Nevertheless, the ascetic must never lose sight of the fact, that salvation is not the fruit of his efforts:

"The thief who received the kingdom of heaven, though not as the reward of virtue, is a true witness to the fact that salvation is ours through the grace and mercy of God. All of our holy Fathers knew this and all with one accord teach that perfection in holiness can be achieved only through humility." (V1, 93)

The salvation of man is a divine work, but the decision whether to take this path of purity of heart is a human decision. By humility man can decide against his own natural will and thereby can bring his nature into a state of availability for divine grace. The passions afflicting the entire being come into the fallen nature through man's free will, as Cassian states more than once¹⁶. The man, in his fallen nature, is actually not free, given the fact that he has to make a choice between good and evil. The possibility of a wrong decision by the will of a fallen nature means a submission to the world of necessity, which indicates the fall of man and the loss of divine likeness. A perfect nature does not need to choose, but recognizes the good in a natural and spontaneous way (Lossky 2009, 145-6). Even if Cassian does not really speak about man's will in this manner, his texts point implicitly to the necessity of becoming free from passions (dispassion)¹⁷. If we do not possess the purity of the heart, "[...] we will not be granted true spiritual knowledge so long as the passion of unchastity lies hidden in the depths of our souls" (John Cassian, *On the eight vices*, V1, 77). Cassian mentions here

¹⁶ See V1, 77 (passion of unchastity), V1, 78 (passion of avarice).

¹⁷ Among others, Petrus of Damascus will particularly dwell on this subject.

the spiritual knowledge, which seems to be dependent on dispassion. This theme is further elaborated on by Hesychios the Priest.

C. Hesychios the Priest (6th-9th c.): Humility leading to spiritual knowledge

Showing that the first sin was arrogance, Hesychios the Priest writes about the necessity of purity. Humility is the most powerful virtue creating and sustaining purity. On the other hand, pride constitutes the worst uncleanness of a being and this exists in the fallen angel himself:

“Indeed, Scripture refers to the devil as ‘unclean’ because from the beginning he rejected humility and espoused arrogance. [...] Clearly, he was called unclean because of his arrogance, defiling himself thus after having been a pure and radiant angel.” (Hesychios the Priest, *On watchfulness and holiness*, V1, 173)

That is why the humility is, as the opposite of pride, “something loved by God, which destroys in us almost all that is evil and hateful to Him, for this reason it is difficult to attain. Even if you can easily find someone who to some extent practices a number of virtues, you will hardly find the odor of humility in him, however you search for it” (V1, 173).

When humility is absent, there is no availability of the human spirit to accept God. More than that, where humility is missing, pride is present. The man who does not practice humility is gripped by his own arrogance and pride (V1, 176)¹⁸.

An important consequence of humility in ascetical life is for Hesychios dispassion (*ἀπάθεια*), by which one has the impulses of his body and mind under control. The process of purifying through humility and asceticism leads not only to freedom from all sin, but also to the uprooting of passions. The progress continues as in climbing a ladder (V1, 182) and “the greater their purity, the more they will see” (V1, 175). If we ask ourselves what they are to see, we find the answer in one of the blessings of the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the pure

¹⁸ Just as when light is absent, all things are dark and gloomy, similarly when humility is absent, all our efforts to please God are vain and pointless.

in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5, 8). Hesychios claims two conditions for seeing God: dispassion and humility, which together lead to spiritual knowledge. In the same context, he considers spiritual knowledge as synonym with "seeing God": "Dispassion and humility lead to spiritual knowledge (*γνώσις*). Without them, no one can see God" (V1, 174). Such knowledge is neither learning nor discovery, but it is a practice of the virtues (*πρακτική*) guided by humility, which aims at the vision of God.

While dispassion pursues the purity of the heart and deliverance from passions, humility concerns the attitude of man. Having both leads to *θεωρία* (the vision of God) (V1, 182)¹⁹. The synonymic use of dispassion along with humility, on one side, and spiritual knowledge, on the other side, shows a broader understanding of the term "knowledge" than in the Ancient philosophy. The translation of the term "*γνώσις*" as "spiritual knowledge" is justified by the fact that all the ascetical efforts of the person are directed towards the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. Another element, which shows the broader scope of Philokalic knowledge, is the watchfulness (*νήψις*) "in the guarding of the intellect" (with humility and the Jesus Prayer) (V1, 192). The intellect should not be humble because of its awareness of knowing nothing or becoming virtuous, but because of seeing God and witnessing God's humility.

The original act of gaining knowledge, when Adam tasted from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and came to precarious knowledge, must come to the original pure knowledge by means of a reverse process of purifying the intellect through humility. Thus, humility must go so deep that the humble one should consider himself being nothing more than his enemies. This consideration must also correspond to real life in ascetical practice. Hesychios offers here an interpretation of the love-for-the-neighbor commandment in light of humility:

¹⁹ „ [...] you will have a clear spiritual vision of Christ, King of the hosts of Israel, together with His co-essential Father and the Holy Spirit, adored in our worship”.

“We should indeed be cut in two by a wise decision of our own free will; we should be our own worst enemy. If we want to fulfill, the first and greatest commandment; – by which I mean the Christ-like way of life, blessed humility, the life of the incarnate God – we should have the same feelings toward ourselves as a person might have toward someone who had time and again grievously injured him and treated him unjustly. Indeed, we should have even stronger feelings than these. Hence, the Apostle says: ‘Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? [...]’ (V1, 191)

In humility and undistracted prayer man should guard his mind in order to keep the knowledge of the spiritual law and receive the visitations of the Holy Spirit (V1, 172). That is why the humility is actually not oppressive for the spirit, but it is a virtue of joy and exaltation: “[...] humility is by nature something that exalts” (V1, 173). Thereby humility is a great presence of hope because man does not rely on himself, but on God. This also brings real peace to the soul, which “lies in the gentle name of Jesus and in its emptying itself of impassioned thoughts” (V1, 183).

D. Peter of Damascus (7th-8thc.): The dynamism of humility

As already mentioned, humility is not a static virtue, but rather a continuously active state of mind that to a certain extent guards the other virtues and maintains their authenticity. Peter of Damascus is one of the Philokalic Fathers, who dwells on many aspects of the dynamism of humility.

In comparison with the other virtues, humility never reaches an end, by its content and substance. For this reason, humility has a specific dynamism:

“The following are the signs of humility: when possessing every virtue of body and soul, to consider oneself to be the more a debtor to God because, though unworthy, one has received so much by grace; [...] on achieving this, again to take it as a gift from God and so to humble oneself further; and, not discovering anything to give God in return, to continue to labour and to consider oneself to be all the more a debtor.” (Peter of Damascus, *A treasury of divine knowledge*, Book I, V3, 147)

Man remains indebted to God forever not only because man has nothing to give, but especially because man is nothing (V3, 96). This nothingness creates here a dynamic expectation because everything is received and must be expected from God (V3, 140)²⁰. Because man receives everything from God and has nothing to give in return, his attitude is one of continuing and increasing debt. Considering himself as being nothing means to keep spiritual awareness alive, which strengthens humility. Peter of Damascus literally seems to have an inherent fear of losing humility. It is a positive fear that can be defined by vigilance:

“In his humility, the further he advances through the acquisition of the virtues, the more he fears. This is natural; for everyone who possesses wealth greatly fears loss, punishment, dishonour, and the consequent fall from his high estate.”
(*Twenty-four discourses*, Book II, V3, 217)

Being nothing, on the other hand, leads to an absolute acceptance of suffering:

“As he advances through this humility towards divine and unfailing love, he accepts sufferings as though he deserved them. Indeed, he thinks he deserves more suffering than he encounters; and he is glad that he has been granted some affliction in this world, since through it he may be spared a portion of the punishments, which he has prepared for himself in the world to be.” (V3, 85-6)

However, this self-denial is not absolute, because although humility is a state of mind in this life, it is aimed at the afterlife. In his humble attitude in this life, man hopes to be with God in the eternal life after death. Accepting the sufferings of this life, in hope, leads him to increased humility, which is “the greatest of all virtues” (V3, 239). In the deliberately and actively accepted sufferings of Christ, the dynamism of hope makes the process not a remote expectation, but it offers also a

²⁰ “The humble man censures and blames himself and no one else when he suffers affliction. Consequently, he patiently awaits for God to release him, and when this happens he rejoices and gratefully endures whatever comes; and through his experience of these things he gains spiritual knowledge”.

foretaste in this life. By the practice and acceptance of sufferings, which are considered deserved sufferings, man advances more and more in “humility: the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit, the gateway to the kingdom of heaven that is to say, to dispassion” (V3, 239).

If one is crucified with Christ in humility and suffering, thus becoming the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit, then he is no longer himself, but the one whose spirit dwells in him. This thought follows the Pauline text: “20. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Gal. 2, 20-21). In order for Christ to dwell in man through the grace of his Holy Spirit, in this life, one must remain humble; one must die to himself and his sinful nature, so that Christ lives in him. For Peter of Damascus humility is the only way by which man gives way to God’s grace in his human spirit: “What shall I do to acquire unceasing pain of soul? Shall I fast and keep vigil? Yet without humility, I will gain nothing” (V3, 116). Because Christ does not force anyone to follow the path of humility (V3, 183)²¹, that decision belongs to man. At the same time, however, it is true that human efforts without humility and with a claim to merit have no value. Claiming one’s own merits contradicts the virtue of humility and the self-sacrificing love of Christ.

Enduring sufferings with hope, making efforts without expecting any reward or appreciation, acknowledging debts that through their fulfilment create more and deeper debts, continuous fear of losing the humility, meekness as the substance of humility (V3, 96) in suffering, all these contrasts constitute a specific kind of dialectics in the Philokalic writings. Peter of Damascus says it himself:

“Human effort is profitless, says St John Chrysostom, without help from above; but no one receives such help unless he himself chooses to make an effort. We need always both things; we need the human and the divine, ascetic practice and spiritual knowledge, fear and hope, inward grief and solace, tearfulness and

²¹ “Through His holy humility, He shows us here, as everywhere, the path to salvation, and how He does not constrain anyone”.

humility, discrimination and love. For, he says, all things in life are twofold: day and night, light and dark, health and sickness, virtue and vice, ease and adversity, life and death." (V3,167-68)

However, it is not a dialectics of contrasts, as in ancient Greek philosophy, but a dynamic dialectics, which tries to overcome the contradiction of the opposite terms. At the center of this dynamic dialectics is humility with its unifying form and assurance of authenticity. Humility here means not only an acknowledgment of one's own powerlessness and a surrendering of the self in the hands of God, but it also indicates the possibility of a deep change in the human being. The humility as state of mind for spiritual knowledge leads to dispassion and aims at a profound change in human existence, namely the transcendence of one's own nature. Humility itself is for Peter of Damascus "more than natural, since the humble man pursues every virtue and, though not a debtor, he regards himself as the greatest debtor of all. [...] The person who remains within the bounds of nature is saved if he abandons his own will and fulfils that of God; but to the person who transcends these bounds God will give the crown of endurance and glory, because he has renounced not only what is forbidden by the law but also, with God's help, his own nature. He loves the supranatural God with all his soul and imitates His dispassion with all his strength" (V3, 83). Here he operates a clear distinction between two ways of salvation: one within the bounds of nature (determined by the law) and the other beyond the bounds of nature (freed by dispassion). The second way refers to the possibility of transcending the nature and reaching the highest form of divine love. Transcending nature does not mean that nature is canceled in its natural course, but that it is immediately brought to its original goal (before the fall of man), it is instantaneously deified. This goal is both cosmological and eschatological. Nature is transfigured by the transcendence (of resurrection):

"Saintly humility is something that transcends nature, and an unbeliever cannot achieve it, but thinks that it is contrary to nature. St Dionysius the Areopagite speaks of this when writing to St Timothy about such men: he says that to the ancients the resurrection of the dead appeared contrary to nature, whereas to

himself and to St Timothy – and in the eyes of the truth itself – it is not contrary to nature but it transcends nature. This at least is how it looks to us; in God’s eyes, however, it does not transcend nature, but is quite natural; for God’s commandment is His nature.” (V3, 267)

E. Maximus the Confessor (580-662 AD): humility as gentleness and freeing state of intellect

In his interpretation of the Bible’s *Book of Jonah*, Maximus the Confessor says: “ashes are humility”²². Beyond the well-known interpretation of the ashes from the Judaic tradition²³ Maximus the Confessor means it here as a symbol of nothingness. Man, in himself, is nothing without the fire of grace. This is not a matter of claiming the existence of non-being. Not being nothing, but being everything, Christ made himself nothing for the sake of man. As he said: “Learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matt. 11, 29), he meant, “Gentleness keeps the soul’s incentive power in a calm state” (Maximus the Confessor, *Four hundred texts on love*, V2, 62). The incentive power of the soul is the instinct for self-preservation. This power must be turned into gentleness.

Humility as gentleness, already mentioned in Petrus of Damascus (V3, 96), is for Maximus the great and unseen power of the powerless. Gentleness is meant here literally as in “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5, 5). This kind of gentleness is not an appearance that can be equated with politeness, but rather an absolute availability to otherness, an ecstasy for others. The humble one is voluntarily nothing, so that the other is and receives everything. In other ways than Peter of Damascus Maximus, he reaches the same goal of humility: love for the neighbour.

In the theology of Maximus the Confessor, humility has a liberating function. By humility, one frees oneself from the idols of one’s own imagination, because the state of humility renders questionable any intellectual assertion of the human spirit and leads to the real (spiritual)

²² See Maximus the Confessor, *Various texts on theology, the divine economy, and virtue and vice*, V2, 259.

²³ The ashes in the Judaic tradition were used as symbol for mourning (Cf. Dan. 9, 3).

knowledge (V2, 107)²⁴. By stating that “[...] humility frees the intellect from conceit and self-esteem” (V2, 62), the Confessor considers humility the vital virtue for recognizing the humble status of man. The liberating function of humility goes hand in hand with its ascetic function. While “the one (humility) cuts out the passions of the soul, the other (ascetic hardship) those of the body” (V2, 61), freeing a man from all sins. Maximus regards man in his entirety, as soul and body. That is why humility is not only directed towards his spirit, but also towards his physical asceticism: “Humility consists in constant prayer combined with tears and suffering” (V2, 97). Ultimately, none of the two constituent parts of human existence can be viewed separately, but together as a whole. This view of humility, in relation not only to the soul but also to the body, is in accordance with the physical stance of the hesychasts when praying (their gaze is always directed to one’s own chest).

The reason why humility should free the intellect (*νοῦς*) from idols and fancies (V2, 77-78)²⁵ is not only the danger of pride, but also an emptying of the mind. Continuous prayer with tears and suffering is the ascetic equivalent of the emptying of the mind. This emptying of the mind in prayer is what Maximus calls “journey” (*ἐκδημία*) when the intellect looks beyond all things:

“These (noetic essences) enable the human intellect, mounted upon them and carried above all visible things, to journey towards God and to attain the summit of blessedness.”²⁶

In this spiritualized state, the intellect overcomes the form and matter of the world (*Four hundred texts on love*, V2, 76); it goes beyond flesh and encounters God. The journey of the intellect occurs in love because the emptied mind is now filled with the divine knowledge of

²⁴ “Dispassion and humility lead to spiritual knowledge. Without them no one will see the Lord”.

²⁵ “For an intellect agitated by passions is beset by impassioned conceptual images whether the body is awake or asleep”.

²⁶ See *Various texts on theology, the divine economy, and virtue and vice*, V2, 208. Cf. Thunberg 2005, 464.

the Trinity. Leaving and emptying itself by humility the intellect lives now outside its ego, it lives an “ecstasy of love” (κατ’ ἐρωτικὴν ἔκστασιν)²⁷.

In its noetic encounter with the Trinitarian God, the human spirit remains humble, for humility ensures that all other virtues are maintained and man is glorifying God, and not himself. In Orthodox theology, this journey towards God is called the deification of man. The role of humility is to accompany and continuously preserve the noetic state of the intellect. That is why we can say that maybe the most significant function of humility in Confessor’s theology is the preserving one. Every step forward and every fight won against devilish temptations and against sinful tendencies of one’s own nature can only be preserved by the humility as grounded state of being, which never ceases to remind one that he is nothing. All the virtues of the saints: goodness, love, mercy, continuous prayer, and so on, are able to remain unwavering because “they (the saints) hold fast throughout their lives to the highest of all blessings, humility that conserves other blessings and destroys their opposites” (V2, 282). The virtue of humility becomes a kind of “constant companion” for those who fear²⁸ the Lord and “reach a state of divine love” (Maximus the Confessor, *Four hundred texts on love*, V2, 57). The later Fathers of the *Philokalia* continued this understanding of humility and its role in the process of man’s deification. Symeon Metaphrastes spoke of “prayer wrestling and striving with his heart to make it receptive and obedient to God”²⁹ and Gregory Palamas (1296-1359 AD) presented humility as an essential condition for prayer: “Let us, then, also become poor in spirit by being humble”. The apophatic theology, already beginning with Gregory of Nysa (335-394 AD) and Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite (5th-6th c.), and continued by Maximus the Confessor, became in Palamism and the mystical theology

²⁷ See *Two hundred texts on theology and the incarnate dispensation of the Son of God*, V2, 122.

²⁸ Here it is not a question of fear in the familiar sense of the word, but of a humble hoping and awe at the *mysterium tremendum*.

²⁹ See Symeon Metaphrastes, *Paraphrase of the homilies of St Makarios of Egypt*, V3, 346.

of modern times until today essentially predicated on the state of humility³⁰.

3. Similarities and differences between Platonic or Neoplatonic modesty and Philokalic humility

A. Similarities

Intellectual activity is in Platonic and Neoplatonic epistemology the main (and only) epistemic function of the soul. In order to see the divine things, the intellect has to look and move beyond the materiality of the world. In its epistemic process of ascension towards the divine, the intellect develops a certain attitude towards the infinity of God. As an example, we have quoted Socrates' attitude to the true knowledge, which comes very close to the Philokalic aspiration towards spiritual knowledge. Awareness of one's own ignorance represents a common element for both parties. Awareness of ignorance necessarily includes several virtues that accompany the intellect in its ascent.

The Platonic virtue of modesty is the one, which shows substantial common ground with the Philokalic virtue of humility. The recognition of one's own epistemic boundaries, which are determined by the key-term "nothing", leads to traces of (epistemic) humility in Platonism. The term "nothing" constitutes itself as a positive starting point because it means recognizing one's own condition.

In the epistemic process of the intellect, both parties require a specific understanding of the virtues. Every virtue is a building block in the process. Plato does not seem to postulate an absolute centre of virtue, for what one virtue lacks, another possesses. This complementarity is also recognizable in the *Philokalia*. That is why we can speak about a notable similarity regarding the interdependence and the unity of the virtues.

³⁰ The influence of Philokalic humility will also be evident in Western mysticism. Being influenced by Euagrios Pontikos and Maximus the Confessor, Meister Eckhart stated: "Das sicherste Fundament, auf dem diese Vollkommenheit sich zu erheben vermag, das ist die Demut; denn wessen Natur hier in der tiefsten Niedrigkeit kriecht, dessen Geist fliegt auf zur höchsten Höhe der Gottheit" (Eckhart 1990, 23).

Plato shows this tendency in *Protagoras* (1219), where he regards the virtues as parts of a whole. In this context, one can observe that differentiating the virtues is important for Protagoras (the example about the parts of the human face), but not for Socrates. Socrates prefers the example of gold as a homogeneous material (without differentiable aspects in its composition). Therefore, one can conclude that for Socrates all virtues are equally important. If one is missing, all the others are just a sham. In the *Philokalia* the unity of the virtues appears as an absolute condition, as we have seen in the case of humility. One can have all the virtues, but if he has no humility, the virtues become void. Mark the Ascetic says: “no single virtue by itself opens the door of our nature; but all the virtues must be linked together in the correct sequence”³¹.

With regard to the similarities between Neoplatonism and the *Philokalia*, we must mention Iamblichus’ striking approach to the Philokalic Fathers. Our analysis of Iamblichus and Peter of Damascus shows that their approaches are very similar. While Plotinus places humility in the research area of the human mind and gives it a more formal character, Iamblichus goes beyond Plotinus’ assertion and ascribes to Neoplatonic modesty the characteristics of humility. The meeting point between Iamblichus and the Philokalic thinking is the term “nothing”. This time “nothing” concerns not only the limitations of knowledge, as in Socrates’ case, but the being itself. Man is nothing. In his meditations on prayer, Iamblichus claims that human effort and intellect cannot do anything by themselves, for salvation comes exclusively from the divinity. This is probably the culmination of humility in Neoplatonism.

It cannot be determined with accuracy to what extent some of the Philokalic Fathers were influenced by Platonism or Neoplatonism. This is beyond the scope of our work. It should only be mentioned, however, that Proclus had a considerable influence on Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite, as Josef Stiglmayr (1933) was able to demonstrate at the beginning of the 20th century. Even if the Areopagite is not one of the Philokalic Fathers, he is quoted several times in the *Philokalia*³². His

³¹ To be consulted “*Philokalia*”, Marc the Ascetic, *On those who think they are made righteous by works*, V1, 128.

³² See footnote 74.

influence on Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas was also considerable. In this sense, the assertion of an influence of Greek philosophy on the *Philokalia*, even indirectly through the Areopagite, is conceivable.

B. Differences

The significant differences between Platonic or Neoplatonic modesty and Philokalic humility have their roots in the doctrine of God. The philosophical Divine of the Greek philosophy is not clearly defined like the Incarnate God of the Christian thought. The centrality of a God who became man justifies the orientation of Philokalic asceticism and the associated humility towards this person. This means that the path of humility is precisely indicated. The Christian state of humility imitates the humility of Christ and hopes to attain it personally. In addition, the availability of Christ is conditioned by the faith in a triune God, because the Son of God was sent to men by the Father and salvation is possible only through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, the virtue in Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy relates to a spiritual and epistemic training of the self for the attainment of true knowledge. The inexistence of a humility model led to the inexistence of humility as it is understood in *Philokalia*. That is why we deal with the virtue of modesty as the closest to Philokalic humility. Obviously, most of the differences between the two parties are determined by their historical contexts. The concrete path to follow for the Philokalic humility is the incarnate, humble God on the cross. Apostle Paul knew the mindset of those who did not believe in Christ when he said: "But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness" (I Cor. 1, 23). To the Greek philosophy, the cross of Christ meant weakness and lack of reason.

The inexistence of humility in Greek philosophy comes both from missing a concrete example, as shown above, and from the trust in human epistemic abilities; Iamblichus is to be considered an exception here. On the other hand, Christian humility is a state of being humble insofar as the salvation of man is an exclusively divine act.

The striving for the all-embracing salvation in the *Philokalia*, means the entire creation and the body are approached differently from Platonic and Neoplatonic thinking. While in the *Philokalia* the body, together with the soul, must reach dispassion and transcend the sinful materiality of the world, in the Greek Philosophy the aim is the liberation from the body and its passions. A direct consequence of it is that the intellect is considered the only human part that is spiritually capable of coming into contact with the divine. On the other hand, in the *Philokalia* a new element appears which is also a goal for the virtues: the heart. The consideration of the heart in the Philokalic doctrine of salvation comes from the above-mentioned unity of man as body and soul. On the other hand, the absence of the heart in Platonism implies a purely epistemic understanding of the intellectual ascent.

The differences between Platonism or Neoplatonism and the *Philokalia* were determined by the historical thinking context. The existence of Jesus Christ in history and the influence of his doctrine and way of life on later Christian thought led to a uniqueness of the Christian doctrine of God, which distinguishes it from all other thinking until today.

Conclusion

The Philokalic understanding of humility has its consequences especially in Eastern Theology to this day. The perception of humility as a renunciation of one's own will – as the will of nature – in favor of the ecstatic expression of the image of God in man has led to a specific theological development of the concept of person. Vladimir Lossky, for example, takes the view:

“The human hypostasis can fulfill itself only by renouncing its own will [...]. The individual being, the self-assertion, in which the person adheres to the nature and loses its true freedom, must be broken. This is the basic principle of asceticism: a voluntary renunciation of one's own will, of the illusion of individual freedom, in

order to find true freedom, the freedom of the person who is each one's own image of God." (Lossky 2009, 142)³³

Humility, as a humble state of mind, means to glorify the Creator continuously and recognize one's own nothingness. Thereby is the virtue of humility maybe the most relevant corresponding characteristic of apophatic theology. Nevertheless, as Christos Yannaras warns, "the goal of virtues is the truth and not the other way around" (Yannaras 1982, 269-70), the virtues should be seen in relation to their goal.

A certain form of renunciation as humility, or at least modesty, can be observed even in the philosophy of the 20th century. Martin Heidegger considers that

"The waiver (renunciation) does not take. The waiver gives. It gives the inexhaustible power of the simple."³⁴ (Heidegger 1953, 7)

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³³ Free Translation from German: "Die menschliche Hypostase kann sich nur verwirklichen in Verzicht auf den eigenen Willen [...]. Das Individuelle, die Selbstbehauptung, in der die Person sich mit der Natur vermischt und ihre wahre Freiheit verliert, muss zerbrochen werden. Dies ist das Grundprinzip der Askese: ein freiwilliger Verzicht auf den eigenen Willen, auf das Trugbild der individuellen Freiheit, um die wahre Freiheit zu finden, die Freiheit der Person, die jeder das eigene Abbild Gottes ist".

³⁴ Translation from German: "Der Verzicht nimmt nicht. Der Verzicht gibt. Er gibt die unerschöpfliche Kraft des Einfachen".

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