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Notes on John Philoponus and the Tritheist Controversy in the Sixth Century

When the acrimonious controversy over the Council of Chalcedon cooled down to some extent, over a hundred years after it had begun, the Christian East witnessed the outbreak of a dispute over the doctrine of the Trinity. Towards the end of the fourth century, this issue seemed to have been settled with the Cappadocians' momentous contribution to Trinitarian theology. At the same time, there was a shift of attention to Christology, mainly owing to the questions raised by Apollinarius of Laodicea. In the second half of the sixth century, however, the problems which had troubled Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, in his *Ad Ablabium* and *Ad Graecos*, re-emerged. The rise of "Tritheism" is usually connected with the teaching of the Syrian Miaphysite John Ascoutzanges, the sobriquet meaning literally "with bottle-shaped boots". According to the information given in Michael the Syrian's *Chronicle*, Ascoutzanges, a native of Apamea, studied Greek philosophy in Constantinople under Samuel (also called Peter) of Rešaina. After his master's death, he began to state in public that there were "as many natures, substances and godheads as hypostases" in the Trinity.[1] Michael the Syrian insinuates that the origin of Ascoutzanges' heresy was associated with his philosophical studies. In order to sustain his doctrine of a plurality of natures and godheads in the Trinity, Ascoutzanges produced a collection of Patristic testimonies, which is no longer extant. An entry in the chronology of Elias of Nisibis assigns to these events the year 556/557 AD.[2]

The most prominent advocate of Tritheism was the Alexandrian philosopher and theologian, John Philoponus (c. 490–575 AD), best known as the prolific commentator on Aristotle from the Neoplatonic school of Ammonius Hermeiou. Philoponus was probably reared a Christian – despite scholarly attempts

1 Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle* IX,30: ed. J.-B. Chabot, 4 vol., Paris 1899-1910, vol. IV, 313 [vol. II, 251] Chabot; see also the shorter report in Gregory Barhebraeus, *Chronicon ecclesiasticum*: ed. J. B. Abbeloos – T. J. Lamy, 3 vol., Louvain 1872-1877, vol. I, 223.

2 Elias of Nisibis, *Opus chronologicum. Pars prior*: ed. E. W. Brooks (CSCO 62* [63*]), Paris 1910, 121 [59]; Jacob of Edessa, *Chronicon*, in *Chronica minora III*: ed. E. W. Brooks, I. Guidi, J.-B. Chabot (CSCO 5 [6]), Louvain 1905 [1907], 322 [244], dates the rise of Tritheism in the 344th Olympiad, i. e. between 557 and 560.

to distinguish between pagan and Christian periods in his life.[3] Among historians
of ancient thought his reputation has been established as an outstanding philo-
sopher who launched an overall attack on the dominant Aristotelian scientific
world-view of his day. In 529, Philoponus published his important treatise
On the Eternity of the World against Proclus. This work aimed at a refutation
of Proclus' arguments that the world did not have a beginning in time. Philo-
ponus saw in them an assault on the Christian faith and felt obliged to counter
them. In his *Against Aristotle*, written only a few years later, Philoponus
argued the same point against the Stagirite. This work contained significant
elements of Christian doctrine. That Philoponus composed his commentary
on Aristotle's *Meteorologica* after these two polemical writings certainly shows
that, in the words of Christian Wildberg, he "cherished his dual interest [*i.e.*
philosophy and theology] throughout his intellectual development".[4] Still, there
is a transition of some kind in his literary activity from philosophical to
theological writings. It was only on the eve of the Second Council of Constan-
tinople in 553 that Philoponus turned to specifically doctrinal subjects.

Philoponus, most likely a prominent figure in the Miaphysite community
of Alexandria, was asked by his co-religionists to give a defence of their
doctrine. In the heated controversy over the doctrine of Chalcedon, he adopted
the posture of an impartial arbiter of the claims put forward by the rival
factions; at the same time, however, he presented Miaphysite Christology, in
the moderate form developed by Severus of Antioch, as the only consistent
exposition of the Incarnation of the Logos. To Philoponus, Chalcedonian
Christology was simply unintelligible. His Christological treatises were all
written in the 550s. Some scholars have detected the seeds of his later Tritheism

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3 See esp. A. Gudeman – W. Kroll, "Ioannes (No. 21, Ioannes Philoponus)", in *Paulys
   Real-Encyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft* 9 (1916), 1764-1795; this view was
   refuted by É. Evrard, "Les convictions religieuses de Jean Philopon et la date de son Commentaire
   aux 'Météorologiques'", *Bulletin de l'académie royale de Belgique, classe des lettres, sciences
   morales et politiques*, sér. 5, 1953, 299-357. K. Verrycken, "The development of Philoponus'
   thought and its chronology", in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Aristotle Transformed: The Ancient Commen-
   tators and their Influence*, London 1990, 233-274, has presented a modified version of this
   thesis. For criticism of Verrycken, cf. C. Scholten, *Antike Naturphilosophie und christliche
   Kosmologie in der Schrift «De opificio mundi» des Johannes Philoponos* (Patristische Texte und
   Studien 45), Berlin – New York 1996, 118-143.
4 C. Wildberg, "Prolegomena to the Study of Philoponus' *contra Aristotelem*", in R.
   Sorabji (ed.), *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science*, London 1987, 197-209, at
   209; cf. also his comprehensive study *John Philoponus' Criticism of Aristotle's Theory of Aether*
   (Peripatoi 16), Berlin – New York 1988. On Philoponus' theological writings, see the chapter
   written by T. Hainthaler in A. Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche, Band
   II/4: Die Kirche von Alexandrien mit Nubien und Äthiopien nach 451*, unter Mitarbeit von T.
   Hainthaler, Freiburg i. Br. 1990, 109-149, and H. Chadwick, "Philoponus the Christian Theo-
   logian", in Sorabji, *Philoponus*, 41-56.

in them; however, Philoponus still appeared there as a defender of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, and insisted on the oneness of the divine substance in his polemical work *Against Andrew*, which was written some time before 567.[5]

Philoponus was not widely known to be a Tritheist until the publication of his treatise *On the Trinity* in 567. This date is rather well attested. On the occasion of the first condemnation of Tritheism by the Oriental archimandrites who had been assembled in the monastery of Mar Bassus in Bitabô on May 17th, 567, Philoponus was not mentioned at all. However, when the same achimandrites at the same place anathematised Tritheism for the second time on January 3rd, 568, they were concerned with a Tritheist treatise that had apparently been circulated anonymously.[6] Shortly before this, in 567, Bishop John of Cellia and the Miaphysite clergy of Alexandria had condemned Philoponus and his *On the Trinity*.[7] That the same treatise was also the object of the archimandrites' second anathema is suggested by a letter written by Miaphysite bishops resident in Constantinople, in which the events connected with the rise of Tritheism until the second assembly at Bitabô in 568 are briefly recapitulated. The untitled work seems to be identical with Philoponus' *On the Trinity*, which had fallen under the anathema of the Alexandrian bishop.[8] This would mean that the treatise was published in the second half of the year 567.[9]

Philoponus soon became notorious as the heresiarch of the Tritheists, especially for Greek-speaking Chalcedonian polemicists. While this ascription is not correct, it is indicative of the importance attached to the underpinning Philoponus provided for the Tritheist doctrine. That this curious theology of the Trinity was a phenomenon found within the Miaphysite party can be illustrated by the fact that Chalcedonians were usually observers of and not participants in this controversy. For instance, John Scholasticus, Patriarch of Constan-

5 Edited by A. Van Roey, "Fragments antiariens de Jean Philopon", in *OLP* 10 (1979), 237-250, at 239-241.

6 Cf. *Documenta ad origines monophysitarum illustrandas*: ed. J.-B. Chabot (CSCO 17 [103]), Louvain 1962 [1965], 167 [117]. This important collection of sources will further be cited as *DM*.

7 *DM*, 160-161 [111-112].

8 Cf. *DM*, 145-155 [101-108], esp. 151-152 [105-106]; cf. A. Van Roey, "La controverse trithéite jusqu'à l'excommunication de Conon et d'Eugène (557-569)", in *OLP* 16 (1985), 141-165, at 162.

9 Cf. H. Martin, "Jean Philopon et la controverse trithéite du VIe siècle", in *Studia Patristica* 5 (1962), 519-525, at 522-525; E. Honigmann, *Évêques et évêchés monophysites d'Asie antérieure au VIe siècle* (CSCO 127), Louvain, 1951, 183, holds that this anathema was directed against all the writings of Philoponus and was issued before the actual publication of the treatise in question.

tinople, presided at a fruitless debate between "orthodox" and "Tritheist" Miaphysites. This meeting was held in the capital in 569/570 under the Emperor Justin II at the initiative of the Tritheist monk Athanasius, the grandson of Justinian's wife Theodora and a member of the Imperial court.[10]

Many Chalcedonian heresiologists of the Patristic age perceived an intrinsic link between Severan Miaphysitism and Tritheism. They considered Severan Miaphysitism to be deeply entrenched in pagan philosophy and particularly in Aristotelian ontology. Anastasius I, Chalcedonian Patriarch of Antioch (559–570 and 593–598), argued in his dialogue against the Tritheists that the distinction between γενικὴ οὐσία and ἰδικὴ οὐσία was at the heart of their doctrine. If the generic divinity exists only *in* the particular substances, that is, in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and is seen only by rational abstraction, then the divine unity has no foundation in reality.[11] Although Anastasius does not explicitly reflect upon the relation between Christian theology and pagan philosophy in this dialogue, it is evident that the distinction between particular and generic substance corresponds to the distinction between first and second substance in Aristotle's *Categories*. Similar criticism was offered by Eutychius, Patriarch of Constantinople (552-565 and 577-582),[12] and by Pamphilus towards the end of the sixth century.[13] Eulogius, Chalcedonian Patriarch of Alexandria (580/1-607/8), regarded Tritheism as a logical develop-

10 Cf. A. Van Roey, "La controverse trithéite depuis la condamnation de Conon et Eugène jusqu'à la conversion de l'évêque Elie", in W. C. Delsman et al. (ed.), *Von Kanaan bis Kerala. Festschrift J. P. M. van der Ploeg*, Kevelaer – Neukirchen-Vluyn 1982, 487-497, at 487-488. A few years later, Anastasius I of Antioch acted as the arbiter between two rival Miaphysite factions, see A. Van Roey, "Une controverse christologique sous le patriarcat de Pierre de Callinique", in *Symposium Syriacum 1976* (OCA 205), Rome 1978, 349-357, at 350-351. P. Allen, "Neo-Chalcedonism and the Patriarchs of the Late Sixth Century", in *Byzantion* 50 (1980), 5-17, inquires into the attitude of Chalcedonian Patriarchs in the late sixth century towards the many Miaphysite splinter groups. Cf. A. Van Roey – P. Allen, *Monophysite Texts of the Sixth Century. Edited, translated and annotated* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 56), Leuven 1994, 105: "For the dogmatic writers on the Chalcedonian side tritheism posed apparently no great problem, since there is only the evidence of Anastasius I of Antioch… who wrote a dialogue against tritheists, and that of Eulogius of Alexandria and Maximus Confessor… tritheism for all these writers is synonomous [sic] with John Philoponus, and they know nothing at all about the earlier stages of tritheist doctrine".

11 Anastasius I of Antioch, *Adversus eos qui divinis dicunt tres essentias*: ed. K.-H. Uthemann, "Des Patriarchen Anastasius I. von Antiochien Jerusalemer Streitgespräch mit einem Tritheiten", in *Traditio* 37 (1981), 73-108, at 102-103.

12 Eutychius, *De differentia naturae et hypostaseos* 1-12: ed. P. Ananian, "L'opuscolo di Eutichio, patriarca di Costantinopoli sulla 'Distinzione della natura e persona'", in *Armeniaca. Mélanges d'études arméniennes, publiées à l'occasion du 250ᵉ anniversaire de l'entrée des Pères Mékhitaristes dans l'Ile de Saint-Lazare (1717-1967)*, Ile de Saint-Lazare – Venise 1967, 316-382, at 364-378 (Italian translation of the ancient Armenian version).

13 Pamphilus, *Diversorum capitum seu difficultatum solutio* XI,42-112: ed. J. H. Declerck, in *Diversorum postchalcedonensium auctorum collectanea I* (CCG 19), Turnhout – Leuven 1989.

ment of Miaphysite Christology. According to the report in Photius, he argued that if "(particular) nature" and "hypostasis" are identified, the consequence will be either to say that along with the one nature of the godhead, there is also one hypostasis, or, since there are three hypostases, to divide the one nature into three natures. At the root of this evil Eulogius saw a rationalistic subjection of the Christian doctrine of God to human criteria, without accounting for the difference between the created and the uncreated order.[14] In the late seventh century, Anastasius of Sinai overtly denounced the Christology of Severan Miaphysitism as a consequence of allowing Greek philosophy to intrude into Christian teaching. Adopting the Aristotelian doctrine of individuals as particular substances, he argued, the Miaphysites came to identify φύσις and πρόσωπον. This fallacious identification had grave consequences. The formula "one incarnate nature of the God-Logos" could be understood to imply a particular nature for each person of the Trinity, not only for the Son, but also for the Father and for the Holy Spirit, and thus give rise to the Tritheist heresy.[15]

The Chalcedonian authors of the sixth and seventh centuries present a similar picture regarding Philoponus' endorsement of Tritheism. A dramatic portrait of Philoponus as the "heresiarch of the Tritheists" is found in the treatise *De sectis*, composed between 580/1 and 607/8, in the form of a dialogue between Philoponus and the personified Church. Philoponus attempted to show that the Chalcedonian doctrine of two natures necessarily implied two hypostases, since nature and hypostasis are the same. When *Ecclesia* contested that in that case we would have to speak of three natures of the Trinity, Philoponus replied that it was perfectly legitimate to do this. He said so,

> taking his starting-point from the Aristotelians. For Aristotle says that of individuals there are particular substances and one common [*sc.* substance]. Thus Philoponus said likewise that there are three particular substances in the Holy Trinity, and one common [*sc.* substance].[16]

Of the many heresiologists who assigned to Philoponus a prominent role among the Tritheists, I shall only mention the priest-monk George (first half of the seventh century), who enjoys a good reputation among scholars today for the quality of the information he provides, which is based on his use of source material.[17] George accused Philoponus of using ἀριστοτελικαὶ τεχνο-

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14 Eulogius, in Photius, *Bibliotheca*, cod. 230: ed. R. Henry, 9 vol., Paris 1969-1991, vol. V, 39.
15 Anastasius Sinaita, *Viae dux* VI,2,9-17, IX,2,65-78, XXIII,3,20-43: ed. K.-H. Uthemann (CCG 8), Turnhout – Leuven 1981.
16 Leontius Scholasticus, *De sectis* V,6: PG 86,1233AB.
17 This has been noted regarding his reports on the Origenist controversies of the sixth century; cf. M. Richard, "Le traité de George Hiéromoine sur les hérésies", in *Revue des études byzantines* 28 (1970), 239-269, at 244-248.

λογίαι, and of subjecting the apostolic teachings of the inspired Fathers to the δόξαι of the Greeks. Thus Philoponus divided the single and indivisible οὐσία of the Godhead into three οὐσίαι. Moreover he reduced this common οὐσία to a mere mental abstraction, which has no existence of its own (ἀνύπαρκτον) apart from the three individual οὐσίαι.[18]

These ancient genealogies of Philoponus' Tritheism have been echoed by most modern students of this crisis. Philoponus is thought to have provided a theoretical foundation for the Tritheist doctrine which had been spread mainly by the activities of Ascoutzanges, Athanasius the Monk, and the Bishops Conon and Eugenius. The German scholar J. M. Schönfelder suggested in 1862 that Philoponus had anticipated the Nominalist position in the Medieval controversy on the ontological status of universals.[19] According to Schönfelder, Philoponus adopted the Aristotelian doctrine of nature and individuals and applied it to the doctrine of the Trinity. The point made by Schönfelder is that what is true for the created order – namely that, for instance, in the case of human nature there is no real unity but only a conceptual or abstract one – was erroneously transferred to the divine nature. Thus Philoponus fell into the same trap as Roscelin of Compiègne in the eleventh century. What both of them had in common was too much confidence in the possibility of inferring from the ontological structure of the created order to the immanent doctrine of the Trinity. They were not sufficiently aware of the essential principle which must be followed when reasoning about God by means of analogies from the created order, expressed very succinctly in the *maior dissimilitudo* of the Fourth Lateran Council.[20]

Recently, Philoponus' Tritheism was re-assessed by Rifaat Ebied, Albert Van Roey, and Lionel Wickham in the course of their research on the Trinitarian

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18 Georgius Hieromonachus, *De haeresibus* 13.2: ed. Richard, *art. cit.*, 266.2-267.7.
19 J. M. Schönfelder, *Die Kirchen-Geschichte des Johannes von Ephesus. Aus dem Syrischen übersetzt. Mit einer Abhandlung über die Tritheïten*, München 1862, 286-297; his analysis is based on the extracts from chapters four and seven of the *Arbiter* in John of Damascus, *Liber de haeresibus* 83, now available in the critical edition of B. Kotter (Patristische Texte und Studien 22), Berlin – New York 1981, 50-55.
20 Cf. the estimates of G. Furlani, "Una lettera di Giovanni Filopono all'imperatore Giustiniano", in *Atti del Reale Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti* 79 (1920), 1247-1265, at 1265: "Egli [*sc.* Philoponus] è monofisita e triteista, perchè egli è aristotelico"; G. Maspéro, *Histoire des patriarches d'Alexandrie*, Paris 1923, 207: "Le trithéisme était donc, indéniablement, un fils du monophysisme: mais un fils compromettant. L'horreur excitée presque universellement par cette nouvelle doctrine, qui semblait aux yeux de beaucoup menacer le monde chrétien d'un retour sournois aux polythéisme, rejaillit en partie sur la doctrine sévérienne"; L. Duchesne, *L'Église au VIe siècle*, Paris 1925, 342-346; H. Martin, *La controverse trithéite dans l'empire Byzantin au VIe siècle*, doctoral thesis Louvain 1959, 161-183; and G. Weiß, *Studia Anastasiana I. Studien zu den Schriften und zur Theologie des Patriarchen Anastasius I. von Antiochien (559-598)*, München 1965, 161-166.

controversy between Peter of Callinicum and Damian, the Miaphysite Pa-
triarchs of Antioch and Alexandria in the 580s.[21] Similarly to Schönfelder,
they extract Philoponus' Tritheism from the *Arbiter*, his major Christological
work. The distinction made between a common and a particular nature, they
claim, bears on the relationship between the one nature and the three hypostases
of the godhead. The one nature is nothing else than the common intelligible
structure of the divine nature that is seen in mental abstraction from the
property of each individual hypostasis, that is, the Father, the Son, and the
Holy Spirit. Ebied, Van Roey and Wickham discern here the nucleus of Philo-
ponus' Nominalist understanding of the ontological status of universals which
made him espouse Tritheism. Nonetheless, they concede that in the *Arbiter*

the question whether the common nature or substance really exists or whether it is only a
product of the mind remains undiscussed, though it is asserted in passing that a nature cannot
exist in itself but only in an individual.[22]

In their edition of Peter of Callinicum's *Contra Damianum*, Ebied, Van Roey
and Wickham develop their hypothesis on Philoponus' endorsement of Trithe-
ism by reference to the Alexandrian's Aristotelianism. If Aristotle's distinction
between first substance and second substance is applied to the Trinity, the
result is a doctrine of three particular natures the unity of which can only be
apprehended by the abstracting intellect.[23]

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21 R. Y. Ebied – L. R. Wickham – A. Van Roey, *Peter of Callinicum. Anti-Tritheist Dossier*
   (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 10), Louvain 1981, 25-33.
22 *Op. cit.*, 26.
23 "It will be enough to say here that his teaching on the Trinity develops from his interpretation
   of the Aristotelian distinction between 'first' and 'second' substance: only first substance
   (πρώτη οὐσία), in the fullest sense of the particular, is, for John, actual; second substance
   (δευτέρα οὐσία) the generic concept, is a creation of the abstracting intellect ('a posterior
   fabrication and invention of the mind', in a phrase often repeated by Peter of Callinicum).
   Applied to the doctrine of God in the Trinity, this means that each divine hypostasis is
   equally God (the three are 'consubstantial' in this sense but there is no actual Godhead
   distinct from the particular Godhead each is). Consequently we may indeed speak of three
   Gods and three Godheads, three substances and natures; the 'one' of the Godhead is in the
   viewing mind alone", R. Y. Ebied – A. Van Roey – L. R. Wickham (ed.), *Petri Callinicensis
   Patriarchae Antiocheni Tractatus Contra Damianum I. Quae Supersunt Libri Secundi* (CCG
   29), Turnhout 1994, XVI. The texts from Philoponus, *In Aristotelis Categorias Commentarium*:
   ed. A. Busse (Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca = CAG XIII,1), Berlin 1898, 9.6-8, 167.13-14,
   103.18-19, which are adduced to substantiate this claim do not serve this purpose. In all of
   these three passages Philoponus reports the opinions of other commentators, and it is not
   clear that he subscribes to them.

These ancient and modern genealogies of Tritheism do not appear entirely satisfactory. In what follows, I shall argue in particular that:

(1) The rise of Tritheism cannot be explained merely by reference to the philosophical tenets of its first proponents. The argument of the "Proto-Tritheists" was above all Patristic, not philosophical. They took as their starting-point a certain interpretation of the language which they found in Patristic texts on the Trinity.

(2) A theological explanation for the genesis of Tritheism can be given. This peculiar doctrine of the Trinity emerged from difficulties in Miaphysite Christology (though not in exactly the same way as suggested by the sixth- and seven-century heresiologists). John Philoponus' reasons for espousing Tritheism were rooted in this Christological problem.

(3) Philoponus' understanding of the ontological status of universals is not "Nominalist", as often assumed. On the contrary, it would seem that he shared the common view on universals of the sixth-century Neoplatonic commentators on Aristotle. Philoponus considered this theory – or rather, certain elements of it – useful for giving Tritheism a philosophical underpinning. I shall attempt to read the extant fragments from his writings on the doctrine of the Trinity against this background.

(1) The origins of Tritheism

As we have seen, authors ancient and modern agree that the starting-point for the Tritheists of the sixth century was philosophical. Thus Ebied, Van Roey and Wickham conclude:

> Tritheism draws its inspiration from a certain philosophical system which it applies to the Trinity. Tritheism is a rationalistic approach which seeks to explain the divine by concepts and principles derived from the created order.[24]

However, the origins of Tritheism cannot be explained merely as an intrusion of pagan philosophy into Christian theology. We are told by Michael the Syrian that John Ascoutzanges studied philosophy, but the impact of his studies on the genesis of his Tritheist beliefs is not clear. John Philoponus certainly applied his philosophical acumen to his defence of Ascoutzanges' doctrine, but this was a decade after the latter had started to speak about three natures, three substances, and three godheads. Michael the Syrian also tells us that Ascoutzanges produced a Patristic florilegium to substantiate his views. Indeed, I should like to suggest that the origins of the Tritheist heresy lie in a

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24 Ebied–Van Roey–Wickham, *Peter of Callinicum*, 33.

particular interpretation of the language used by Patristic authorities for spea-
king about the Trinity. In other words, Tritheism emerged from a linguistic
problem and was originally centred on a Patristic, not a philosophical argu-
ment.[25] This is certainly the impression one receives when reading the earliest
extant document which engages with the Tritheists, the *Theological Discourse*
by Theodosius, the Miaphysite Patriarch of Alexandria. Theodosius wrote
this work during his exile in Constantinople after the outbreak of the contro-
versy in 556/7 and before 564, most likely not long after 560.[26] Subsequently,
it became the most authoritative refutation of Tritheism within the Miaphysite
party.

The *Encyclical Letter* which Theodosius attached to the *Discourse* strongly
suggests that the controversy arose over the interpretation of the use of language
in Patristic authorities:

> At first they had a fight about small words and the interpretations of some expressions of the
> Fathers. They thought they agreed with one another in doctrine, but each party stuck to some
> word or other.[27]

What kind of conclusions some participants in this controversy actually drew
from their reading of the Fathers is made clear in an extant *Overview* to
Theodosius' *Discourse*.[28] These "Proto-Tritheists" spoke of three substances
or natures of the Trinity

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25 By contrast, Ebied–Van Roey–Wickham, *Peter of Callinicum*, 25, argue that "Tritheism's
    starting-point was a philosophical one. The patristic arguments they adduced in favour of it
    were later arrivals. It was the concept of substance or nature which led John Ascoutzanges to
    affirm three substances or natures in God". However, they have to concede: "It is somewhat
    surprising that despite the philosophical origins (John Ascoutzanges, it will be recalled, was a
    philosopher) the first writing to give us knowledge of it, Theodosius' Treatise, is completely
    patristic without a single word on the philosophical ideas we have just touched on", *op. cit.*,
    33.

26 I accept the dating suggested by Van Roey, "La controverse trithéite jusqu'à l'excom-
    munication de Conon et d'Eugène (557-569)", 143-144. In 564, the new Patriarch of Antioch,
    Paul of Beit Ukkâmê, wrote a synodical lettter to Theodosius in which he approved of the
    Discourse: *DM*, 106.7-14 [73.37-74.6]. On Theodosius' writings against the Tritheists, cf. Van
    Roey–Allen, *Monophysite Texts*, 124-143. They argue: "If we keep to the date proposed by
    Elias of Nisibis for the beginning of tritheism, we must accept that within a few years in the
    monophysite church, particularly in Constantinople, a trend had begun, influenced by Aristo-
    telian philosophy, against the traditional trinitarian doctrine"; ibid., 125-126. However, they
    observe with regard to Theodosius' *Theological Discourse*: "Theodosius' argument is merely
    a Patristic one… This is somewhat disappointing. We shall have to assume that the tritheists
    themselves in this period, particularly if not exclusively, had recourse to the testimony of the
    Fathers in order to proclaim their teaching"; *op. cit.*, 138-139.

27 Theodosius, *Encyclical Letter*: ed. Van Roey–Allen, *Monophysite Texts*, 145.24-27 (the Syriac
    version of the manuscript Brit. Libr. Add. 12,155); translation: *op. cit.*, 127.

28 According to Van Roey–Allen, *Monophysite Texts*, 273, the *Overview* was probably not
    written by Theodosius himself.

because in the tractates of the Holy Fathers, they found that each of the persons or hypostases was also termed 'substance' and 'nature' and that on several occasions there was written 'its substance' and 'its own nature' in connection with each hypostasis; and because we all confess and say 'one incarnate nature of God'; and because they found that Chrysostom had said concerning the only-begotten Son of God: Οὗτος ὁ λόγος οὐσία τις ἐστιν [*In Ioh.* IV: PG 59,47].[29]

The main point of controversy would seem to have been that in the Fathers the term "substance" is used individually for each of the three persons of the Trinity. In the *Overview* to Theodosius' *Discourse*, this is put as follows:

> The Trinity in its entirety is called a substance; but separately God the Word is also called a substance, for example by John Chrysostom; and the Holy Spirit is also called a substance, for example by Gregory the Theologian; one finds also that the Father is called a substance.[30]

For this reason, some considered it permissible and indeed consequent to speak of three substances in the Trinity as well. That they contended for a certain interpretation of Patristic authorities rather than introduced philosophical arguments seems clear from Theodosius' reply. His refutation is exclusively concerned with the correct interpretation of doctrinal statements found in Patristic sources.[31]

Startled by such an interpretation of Patristic texts which was obviously at odds with the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, some of those who opposed the Tritheists went to the other extreme. They maintained that since there is only one substance or nature in the Trinity, it is this nature which was made incarnate in its entirety. While the Tritheists were denounced as Arians, for denying the consubstantiality of the three persons in the Trinity, their opponents were quickly accused of Sabellianism, for failing to account for the distinctions between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Notably, Theodosius engaged in controversy with those who argued in a more or less crude way that the entire Trinity became human along with the Logos.[32] Only the first part of his

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29 *Overview. DM*, 36.23-37.2 [24.12-19], in the translation of Van Roey–Allen, *Monophysite Texts*, 127.

30 *Overview. DM*, 37.10-15 [24.27-31]

31 Theodosius, *Theological Discourse*: ed. Van Roey–Allen, *Monophysite Texts*, 149-150/185-186 [223]. Theodosius follows the advice of of Basil of Caesarea, *Ep. 52*, 24-26: ed. Y. Courtonne, *Saint Basile. Lettres I*, Paris 1957, 134, not to rely on human arguments, but on the testimonies of the Fathers.

32 Theodosius, *Theological Discourse*: 178-184/209-214 [247-251]. Van Roey–Allen, *Monophysite Texts*, 137, suggest that the opponents of the Tritheists who arrived at this conclusion may be the "Condobaudites" noted by John of Ephesus, *Historiae ecclesiasticae pars tertia* II,45: ed. E. W. Brooks (CSCO 105 [106]), Louvain 1935 [1936], 111-112 [81-82], and Timothy of Constantinople, *De iis qui ad ecclesiam accedunt*: PG 86,57BC.

Theological Discourse is concerned with the doctrine of the Trinity; the second part is dedicated to Christology.[33]

(2) Philoponus' endorsement of Tritheism

Philoponus' motive for entering the debate can be discerned at this point in the early stage of the Tritheist controversy, when the staunch opponents of the new heresy reached problematic conclusions which had a bearing on the relationship between *theologia* and *oikonomia*. In their response to the teaching put forward by Ascoutzanges, they overemphasised the unity of divine nature to such an extent that they could not explain sufficiently how one hypostasis of the Trinity, the Logos, became flesh apart from the Father and the Holy Spirit. It would seem that Ascoutzanges' doctrine appealed to Philoponus as the more conclusive answer to this question. We should take into account the doctrinal reasons, properly speaking, which brought him to his endorsement of Tritheism. Reconstructing this history is an intriguing task, since only a few fragments in Syriac translation have come down to us from Philoponus' writings on the Trinity. However, his major Christological treatise, the *Arbiter*, provides us with an idea of his theological concerns.

In the seventh chapter of the *Arbiter*, Philoponus sets forth his understanding of nature, hypostasis and person. The teaching of the Church, he says,

> holds that nature is the common intelligible content of being of those which participate in the same substance (τὸν κοινὸν τοῦ εἶναι λόγον τῶν τῆς αὐτῆς μετεχόντων οὐσίας), as every man is a rational, mortal living being, receptive of reason and understanding; for in this respect no single man is distinguished from another. Substance and nature tend to the same. Hypostasis, however, or person, is indicative of the concrete individual existence of each nature (τὴν ἰδιοσύστατον τῆς ἑκάστου φύσεως ὕπαρξιν) and, so to speak, a circumscription compounded of certain properties (περιγραφὴν ἐξ ἰδιοτήτων τινῶν συγκειμένην), in which those that participate in the same nature are different, to say it in brief, those which the Peripatetics usually call individuals (ἄτομα), those in which the division into genera and species comes to an end. The doctors of the Church name them hypostases, sometimes also persons.[34]

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33 Compare this with Anastasius I of Antioch's dialogue against the Tritheists. Three quarters of the dialogue deal with Christology, not with the doctrine of the Trinity. The question whether the whole Trinity was made flesh in its entirety is raised by the "Dissenter" in reponse to the "Orthodox", who defends the traditional doctrine of the Trinity; cf. Uthemann, "Des Patriarchen Anastasius I. von Antiochien Jerusalemer Streitgespräch mit einem Tritheiten", 103ff.

34 Philoponus, *Arbiter* VII,21: ed. A. Šanda, *Opuscula Monophysitica Ioannis Philoponi*, Beryti Phoeniciorum 1930, 20.20-21.3 – 51.31-39 Kotter (cf. fn. 19).

In ecclesiastical terminology individuals are called hypostases because in them genera and species assume existence (ὕπαρξις), and they do not subsist apart from them (χωρὶς τούτων οὐχ ὑφιστάμενα).[35]

Philoponus' use of the term "the logos of so-and-so" here is indebted to Aristotle who employs it in the locutions λόγος τοῦ τί ἦν εἶναι and λόγος τῆς οὐσίας[36]. There it means "the *logos* that says what it is to be so-and-so"[37], which is elucidated by Aristotle's explanation of synonyms:

> For if one is to give an account (λόγον) of each [*sc.* man and ox] – what being an animal is for each of them – one will give the same account[38].

The term οὐσία in the technical expression λόγος τῆς οὐσίας indicates "being" in general, and is thus not restricted to the first Aristotelian category.[39]

Crucial to Philoponus' understanding of nature and hypostasis is his distinction between common and particular nature. The common nature, for instance, of man, is such that *qua* common nature no individual man is distinguished from another. But when it is instantiated in an individual it is proper to this individual exclusively. Here Philoponus refers to a distinction between the common and the particular which he has developed in the fourth chapter of the *Arbiter*. Thus the "rational, mortal living being in me (τὸ ἐν ἐμοὶ ζῷον λογικὸν θνητόν)" is not common to anyone else.[40] Philoponus illustrates this by a few examples: when a man or an ox or a horse suffers, other individuals of the same species (τὰ ὁμοειδῆ τῶν ἀτόμων) do not suffer; when Paul dies, this does not entail that any other man dies; and when Peter is born and comes into existence, the men to be born after him do not yet exist. So nature is spoken of in two ways:

35 ibid., VII,21: 21.10-13 Šanda – 51.46-50 Kotter.
36 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Δ.29: 1024ᵇ29, Z.1: 1028ᵃ35 et al., *Categories* 1: 1ᵃ1, 1ᵃ10-12.
37 C. Kirwan, *Aristotle's* Metaphysics. *Books Γ, Δ and E. Translated with Notes*, Oxford ²1993, 179, uses the translation "formula", which is also endorsed by M. Frede – G. Patzig, «*Metaphysik Z*». *Text, Übersetzung und Kommentar*, 2 vol., München 1988, vol. I, 20. This has a decidedly linguistic connotation, which seems misleading in the context of the ancient philosophical and theological debate. I opt for a translation such as "intelligible content", which would correspond to Aquinas' understanding of *ratio*, cf. J. F. Wippel, "Metaphysics", in N. Kretzmann – E. Stump (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, Cambridge 1993, 85-127, at 94-95. J. Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa. Philosophical Background and Theological Significance* (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 46), Leiden 2000, 71-73, sheds light on the conceptual framework of Cappadocian Trinitarian theology against the background of this philosophical discussion.
38 Aristotle, *Cat.* 1: 1ᵃ10-2.
39 Aristotle, *Cat.* 5: 2ᵃ14-17; Philoponus, *In Cat.*, 20.9-14.
40 Philoponus, *Arbiter* VII,22: 22.17 Šanda – 52.55 Kotter. Philoponus' philosophical teacher, Ammonius, states that in the individual the common species is "circumscribed (περι-γέγραπται)", or "fenced off (περιώρισται)"; Ammonius Hermiae, *In Porphyrii Isagogen*: ed. A. Busse (CAG IV,3), Berlin 1891, 63.19-21.

in one way, when we look at the common intelligible content of each nature on its own, such as the nature of man or of horse which is not [sc. instantiated] in one of the individuals; in another way, when we look at the same common nature which is [sc. instantiated] in the individuals and assumes a particular existence (μερικωτάτην ὕπαρξιν) in each of them, and does not fit with anything else except this alone. For the rational, living being which is in me is not common to any of the other men.[41]

Subsequently, Philoponus applies these conceptions of nature and hypostasis to the doctrine of the Trinity: one nature of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but three hypostases, of which each differs from the other ones by a certain property:[42]

> For what should the one nature of the divinity be if not the common intelligible content of the divine nature which is seen on its own and is separated by the conception (τῇ ἐπινοίᾳ) of the property of each hypostasis?[43]

Philoponus is concerned here with the interaction between Christology and Trinitarian theology; he is anxious to be consistent in the terminology he uses for both *oikonomia* and *theologia*.[44] In order to achieve this he argues that in the Trinity there are particular natures which are distinct from the one common nature of the Godhead. Philoponus' train of thought is as follows: the common intelligible content of the nature of each individual or hypostasis is proper to it and does not fit with any other member of the same species. This has significant ramifications, if we consider that in Christ there is a union of two *natures*, the divine and the human. The common nature of the divinity that is recognised in the Trinity has not become incarnate, otherwise we would predicate the Incarnation also of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Neither has the common human nature been united with the God-Logos, otherwise the whole human race before and after the advent of the Logos would have been united to him. In fact, if we say "nature of the divinity" we mean that nature which has become individualised, as distinct (ἐξιδιασθεῖσαν) from the common nature of the divinity, *in* the hypostasis of the Logos. It is in this sense that we

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41   Philoponus, *Arbiter* VII,22: 21.23-22.1 Šanda – 52.60-66 Kotter. For a similar distinction between οὐσία and ὑπόστασις, see Severus of Antioch, *Homilia cathedralis CXXV*: ed. M. Brière (PO 29), Paris 1960, 234-236. Severus also remarks that "nature" is said in two ways, sometimes denoting οὐσία, sometimes ὑπόστασις, *Contra impium grammaticum. Oratio* II,2: ed. J. Lebon (CSCO 111 [112]), Louvain 1965, 69-70 [55]; *Ep. VI*: ed. E. W. Brooks (PO 12,2), Paris 1919, 196-198; *Ep. LXV*: ed. E. W. Brooks (PO 14,1), Paris 1920, 28-29.

42   Likewise Severus, *Hom. cath. CXXV*: PO 29, 236-240; cf. also *Hom. cath. CXI*: ed. M. Brière (PO 25), Paris 1943, 790-791.

43   Philoponus, *Arbiter* VII,23: 22.6-7 Šanda – 52.72-73 Kotter.

44   This has become common by the sixth century, especially in Leontius of Byzantium; cf. B. E. Daley, "Boethius' Theological Tracts and Early Byzantine Scholasticism", in *Mediaeval Studies* 46 (1984), 158-191, at 171.

confess "one incarnate nature of the God-Logos",[45] distinguishing it from the
Father and the Holy Spirit by the addition "God-Logos". Thus the union of
divinity and humanity in Christ is a union of *particular*, not of *common*
natures.[46] The divine nature is proper to the God-Logos, and by "nature of
humanity", which we affirm to be united to the Logos, we understand that
particular being which alone the Logos has assumed:

> Therefore, with regard to this meaning of nature, hypostasis and nature are the same, as it were,
> except that by the term 'hypostasis' the properties, which along with the common nature are
> added to each individual and through which the individuals are separated from one another, are
> understood as well.[47]

Philoponus' analysis of nature, substance and hypostasis in the seventh chapter
of the *Arbiter* leads us to the core not only of his Christology, but also of his
Trinitarian theology. Let me now turn to the extant fragments of his writings
on the Trinity, which have come down to us not in the original Greek, but in
the form of quotations in various Syriac sources.[48] Hence the interpretation of
these scarce fragments is an intricate task, and I shall not attempt to give a
comprehensive account of them here, but rather select a few points which can
be illuminated with reference to Philoponus' earlier writings on Christology.

   Philoponus argues that what is proper to each of the Persons of the Trinity
– namely that this one is the Father and this one is the Son and this one is the
Holy Spirit – constitutes a species of its own. Philoponus obviously conceives
of the three divine Persons not as different individuals under a common species,
as might have been expected, but as different species under a common genus,
that is, "God". The analogy adduced for this relationship is that of "living
being (animal)" which can be specified as either rational or irrational.[49] It
would seem that what Philoponus means when speaking of the different "pro-
perty" of each divine Person is Porphyry's notion of the specific differentia.
Such "differences that belong by themselves (αἱ καθ' αὑτάς)" are contained in
the λόγος τῆς οὐσίας.[50] In the *Arbiter*, Philoponus speaks of "substantial
difference (οὐσιώδης διαφορά)". For instance, "man" and "horse" are two

45   The only occurrence of this formula in the *Arbiter*: VII,23: 22.17-18 Šanda – 52.86-53.87
     Kotter.
46   That the union is not a union of universals comprising many hypostases is also stated empha-
     tically by Severus, *Ep. II*: ed. E. W. Brooks (PO 12,2), Paris 1919, 186-196, and *Contra
     impium grammaticum. Oratio* II,21 and II,28: CSCO 111 [112], 179-184 [139-144] and 218-225
     [170-176].
47   Philoponus, *Arbiter* VII, 23: 22.21-24 Šanda – 53.92-95 Kotter.
48   A. Van Roey, "Les fragments trithéites de Jean Philopon", in *OLP* 11 (1980), 135-163.
49   Philoponus, *De trinitate*, fr. 6a/b: 150-151 [159] Van Roey.
50   Porphyry, *Isagoge*: ed. A. Busse (CAG IV,1), Berlin 1887, 9.14-16; cf. Philoponus, *In Aristotelis
     de Anima Libros Commentaria*: ed. M. Hayduck (CAG XV), Berlin 1897, 4.4-32.

different substances or natures, the one being a rational animal and the other being an irrational animal. Although they are under the same genus, namely animal, they cannot be subsumed under the same λόγος τῆς οὐσίας, that is, the same species.[51]

Thus Philoponus says in one of his fragments on the Trinity:

> The divine substance is constituted in three-fold fashion in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This substance is divided not only by number but by the properties themselves. And therefore they are entirely different from one another in species (ἑτεροειδεῖς).[52]

Philoponus' point is that it is correct to affirm "three consubstantial substances" in the Trinity. The Fathers only rejected three substances which are non-consubstantial, that is, different in genus. To corroborate this claim, he refers to Dionysius of Rome and Gregory (presumably Nyssen).[53]

(3) Tritheism and ontology

The Tritheists of the sixth century are usually regarded as rationalists who applied their Nominalist understanding of common nature to the Trinity and thus failed to account properly for the real unity of the three divine Persons. This would seem to emerge clearly from the extant fragments of Philoponus' treatise *On the Trinity*, where he states that genera and species are posterior to particular entities and are abstracted from them by our intellect. Philoponus even quotes the famous line from the first book of Aristotle's *De anima*, "the universal living being is either nothing or secondary".[54] For this reason, Philoponus explains, the universal does not exist on its own. Hypostases are called "substances" in the proper sense; common items, however, such as genera and species, are called substances only in a secondary sense.[55]

In this final section of my paper, I shall argue that these isolated passages should be read within the context of the theory on the ontological status of

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51 Philoponus, *Arbiter* VIII,31-32: 28-30 Šanda. Cf. Boethius' final definition of nature in his *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium* I.57-58: ed. H. F. Steward – E. K. Rand – S. J. Tester (Loeb Classical Library), Cambridge, Mass. – London 1973, 80, following Aristotle's *Physica* B.1: 193[a]28-31: "Nature is the specific difference that gives form to anything (*natura est unam quamque rem informans specifica differentia*)".

52 Philoponus, *De theologia*, fr. 13: 153 [160] Van Roey.

53 Philoponus, *De trinitate*, fr. 5a/b and 7: 149-151 [159-160]; *C. Themistum*, fr. 21a/b: 156 [162].

54 τὸ δὲ ζῷον τὸ καθόλου ἤτοι οὐδέν ἐστιν ἢ ὕστερον, Aristotle, *De anima* A.1: 402[b]7; quoted in Philoponus, *De trinitate*, fr. 1: 148 [158] Van Roey.

55 Philoponus, *De trinitate*, fr. 1-3: 148-149 [158] Van Roey.

universals which was common to the Neoplatonic commentators on Aristotle.[56]
According to this theory, universals have no subsistence, that is to say, *concrete*
existence separate from their instantiations in individuals, as Philoponus argues
in his *De Anima Commentary*:

> Universals have their subsistence (ὑπόστασις) in the particulars, but when they are understood
> as universals or general terms, they are found in the mind, for their being general consists in
> their being thought of as general, and thoughts are mental.[57]

Universals do not subsist apart from the particular things in which our ab-
stracting intellect comes to know them. The priority of individuals in the
order of knowing, however, is complemented by the priority of universals in
the order of being. The Neoplatonic commentators of the sixth century thought
that universals could be considered in a threefold way: first, *prior to the many*,
that is, as the ideas in the mind of the demiurge; secondly, *in the many*, that is,
having their *concrete* existence in the particular things of the sensible world;
and thirdly, *posterior to the many*, as concepts which our abstracting intellect
applies to the many particulars.[58] An exposition of this theory is given by
Simplicius in his commentary on the *Categories*, where he argues for three
kinds of common items (τὸ κοινόν). The first is transcendent or separate from
the particulars and is the cause (αἴτιον) of the κοινότης in them, for instance,
"the first animal" or αὐτοζῷον, which endows all animals with "animality" –
qua cause it transcends its effects and is wholly other than they. Thus it is
rather a common cause than a common nature. The second is the common
item which dwells in the individuals, such as in the individual animal; it is the

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56 On this complicated topic, see the seminal paper by K. Kremer, "Die Anschauung der Ammo-
nius (Hermeiou)-Schule über den Wirklichkeitscharakter des Intelligiblen. Über einen Beitrag
der Spätantike zur platonisch-aristotelischen Metaphysik", in *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 69
(1961/2), 46-63, and, dependent upon Kremer, L. Benakis, "The Problem of General Concepts
in Neoplatonism and Byzantine Thought", in D. J. O'Meara (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Christian
Thought*, Albany 1982, 75-86. Essential (though not easy) reading are the works of A. C.
Lloyd, "Neoplatonic logic and Aristotelian logic", in *Phronesis* 1 (1955-6), 58-72 and 146-160;
Form and Universal in Aristotle, Liverpool 1981; *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism*, Oxford
1990.

57 Philoponus, *In De Anima*, 307.33-308.1; translation by Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism*,
71 (slightly modified). Cf. Philoponus, *In Cat.*, 58.7-59.2, Ammonius, *In Aristotelis Categorias
Commentarium*: ed. A. Busse (CAG IV,4), Berlin 1895, 40.19-21, 41.13-15. Boethius, *Contra
Eutychen et Nestorium* III.31-33: 86 Stewart–Rand, quotes the Greek sentence: αἱ οὐσίαι ἐν
μὲν τοῖς καθόλου εἶναι δύνανται· ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἀτόμοις καὶ κατὰ μέρος μόνοις ὑφίστανται.
That substances belong to the class of universals, but subsist only in individuals and particulars,
is also his view in his *In Porphyrii Isagogen Commentarium. Editio Secunda*: ed. S. Brandt
(Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 48), Wien – Leipzig 1906, 166-167.

58 Philoponus, *In Aristotelis Analytica Posteriora Commentaria*: ed. M. Wallies (CAG XIII,3),
Berlin 1909, 435.11-12 (on *An. post.* II: 100^{a}3-^{b}5): ἐπεὶ δὲ τὸ καθόλου τριττόν ἐστι, ἢ τὸ πρὸ
τῶν πολλῶν, ὅπερ εἰσιν αἱ ἰδέαι αἱ παρὰ τῷ Πλάτονι, καὶ τὸ ἐπὶ τοῖς πολλοῖς καὶ τὸ ἐν τοῖς
πολλοῖς; cf. Ammonius, *In Porphyrii Isagogen*, 41.10-42.26, 68.25-69.11.

commonality which constitutes the individual, and is thus differentiated, so that it is not really the same in different species. The third kind of κοινόν is posterior and exists in our thoughts as a result of the process of abstraction (ἐξ ἀφαιρέσεως), which we accomplish by subtracting all differentiae that modify animality in the external world.[59] This "multiplication of the universal" can be found already in the Middle Academy, when a distinction was introduced between the separate or transcendent form (χωριστὸν εἶδος), the Platonic idea, which is the paradigm of the demiurge, and the inseparable or immanent form (ἔνυλον εἶδος) which could be equated with the Aristotelian λόγος ἔνυλος. The doctrine of the Platonic ideas as thoughts in the mind of an Aristotelian self-thinking intellect is attested in Alcinous and may go back to Antiochus (or even Xenocrates).[60] It was also held by Philo of Alexandria, and so exerted a significant influence on Christian theology.[61]

When Philoponus comments on the aforementioned passage from Aristotle's *De anima* ("the universal living being is either nothing or secondary"), he argues that this does not entail a rejection of the Platonic doctrine of ideas as the transcendent principles (λόγοι) in the mind of the demiurge. Rather, this refers to the ὑστερογενῆ, that is, the general concepts (ἐννοηματικά) which our abstracting intellect applies to the many particulars. At the same time, Philoponus emphasises that universals do not subsist apart from the particulars in which they are instantiated.[62] At the background of this theory, there is the anxiety to avoid the problem of a χωρισμός, which is raised by Plato's theory of self-subsisting ideas, as found in the dialogues of his middle period. Hence the Neoplatonic commentators of the sixth century deny that the intelligible realm is a separate world of ideas subsisting in the same way as the individual entities in the visible.

It would seem that we can make sense of the extant fragments from Philoponus' writings on the Trinity if we read them in the context of the position on the ontological status of universals held by the Neoplatonic commentators.[63] In three extant fragments from his *Against Themistius*, Philoponus says:

59 Simplicius, *In Aristotelis Categorias Commentarium*: ed. C. Kalbfleisch (CAG VIII), Berlin 1907, 82.35-83.20; cf. Kremer, "Die Anschauung der Ammonius (Hermeiou)-Schule über den Wirklichkeitscharakter des Intelligiblen", 62-63.

60 See Alcinous, *Didascalicus* IV,155.13-156.23: ed. J. Whittaker, Paris 1990; cf. Lloyd, "Neoplatonic logic and Aristotelian logic", 59-60, and H. J. Blumenthal, *Aristotle and Neoplatonism in Late Antiquity. Interpretations of the* De Anima, London 1996, 13.

61 Philo, *De opificio mundi* V,20: ed. F. H. Colson – G. H. Whitaker (Loeb Classical Library, Philo I), London – Cambridge, Mass. 1949, 16-18.

62 Philoponus, *In De Anima*, 37.17-38.17; cf. also *In Cat.*, 58.13-59.2.

63 E. G. T. Booth, "John Philoponos, Christian and Aristotelian Conversion", in *Studia Patristica* 17 (1982), 407-411, and *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Thinkers*, Cambridge 1983, 56-61, sees a conversion in Philoponus from the commonly accepted Neo-

For we show that the nature which is called 'common', has no existence of its own alongside any of the existents, but is either nothing at all – which is indeed true – or is constituted only in our intellect from particulars.[64]

Nothing which is called 'common' has existence of its own apart from the particular: there exists only this horse, only this man, only this angel.[65]

There is no other God apart from the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, a fourth one who would have his own hypostasis.[66]

Hence what is common to the three hypostases in the Trinity cannot be conceived of in terms of a concretely existing substance. Philoponus' earliest critics took him to mean that the unity between the three Persons of the Trinity is not real, but only a figment of the mind. Arguably, Philoponus' theory does not sufficiently account for the divine unity.

At the origin of the Tritheist contoversy of the sixth century, there was an infelicitous interpretation of Patristic testimonies. Philoponus certainly used his intellectual acumen to defend Ascoutzanges' heretical language on the Trinity and gave it a philosophical foundation. However, what motivated Philoponus' endorsement of Tritheism were problems in the relationship between Trinitarian theology and Christology. Beyond the verbal battle the Tritheist controversy in the sixth century testifies to a genuine crisis in the theological understanding of the mystery of the Triune God.

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platonic metaphysics to a "radical Aristotelianism". According to Booth, this adoption of "Nominalism" then lead to Philoponus' "virtual Tritheism". However, the force of Booth's argument is seriously impaired by the fact that his case for Philoponus' "radical Aristotelianism" is mainly based on the *Scholia on Metaphysics*. These *Scholia* were composed after Michael of Ephesus and thus after 1100, according to S. Ebbesen, *Commentators and Commentaries on Aristotle's «Sophistici Elenchi»* (Corpus Latinum Commentariorum in Aristotelem Graecorum 7), 3 vol., Leiden 1981, vol. III, 86-87.

64 Philoponus, *C. Themistium*, fr. 18: 154 [161] Van Roey.
65 *Op. cit.*, fr. 22: 156 [162].
66 *Op. cit.*, fr. 25: 156 [162].