Treatise 39 (VI 8) develops, over the course of several chapters, an argument relative to the self-causation of the First principle, which we encounter nowhere before Treatise 39, and which entirely vanishes after the said treatise. It is thus an exceptional thesis in Plotinus’ oeuvre, which everything leads us to believe to be an *ad hoc* response to an objection which is itself *ad hoc*. This objection is reiterated by Plotinus in chapter 7, where we read:

Unless some rash statement [τις τολμηρός λόγος] starting from a different way of thinking says that since [the nature of the Good] happens to be as it is [ὡς τυχουσα οὔτος ἔχειν, ὡς ἔχει], and does not have the mastery of what it is, and is what it is not from itself, it would not have freedom, and its doing or not doing what it is necessitated to do or not to do is not in its power.

In response to this ‘rash statement’, Plotinus asserts that, being in no way limited by its being and neither given to chance nor necessitated by other things (10, 34–35), the One produces, begets and causes itself (13, 55; 14, 41; 16, 29; 20, 2. 6. 25–27; 21, 7). Different hypotheses have been put forward as to the origin of this audacious and hostile (ἀντίτυπος, line 16) objection, which could conceal an attack on Plotinus’ system that might be either 1) Epicurean, 2) Gnostic, 3) Christian, 4) Aristotelian (inspired more or less directly by Alexander of Aphrodisias) or 5) fictive (created by Plotinus himself for dialectical purposes) in origin.

In our opinion, the audacious argument is Gnostic in origin, as it is certainly the partisans of this tendency who, ceaselessly insisting on the
free will of one principle which arranges itself as it so desires, would most likely challenge Plotinus that his Principle is there by chance or because it must necessarily be so. We find in one particular text, attributed by Pseudo-Hippolytus to the Nassenians, that the god states that “I become what I wish”, 3 a statement which finds echoes in some lines of Plotinus from 39 (cf. 13, 53–59; 15, 9–10). This recourse to the will of the First principle and the concept of its self-begetting, which emerges exceptionally in Treatise 39, is however amply attested in the larger Gnostic tradition beyond this single citation of Pseudo-Hippolytus. Here are several examples linked to the idea of self-begetting: 4

1. *The Tripartite Tractate:* “It is in the proper sense that he begets himself as ineffable, since he alone is self-begotten, since he conceives of himself, and since he knows himself as he is.” (*NH I* 5, *op. cit.* [note 121], 56, 1–6)

2. *The Gospel of the Egyptians:* “This great name of thine is upon me, O self-begotten Perfect one […]” (*NH IV* 2, 66, 22–23); “[O] Perfect one who art [self-]begotten (and) autonomous […].” (*NH IV* 2, 79, 5–6) 5

3. *The Three Steles of Seth:* “We bless thee, non-being, existence which is before existences, first being which is before beings […].” (*NH VII* 5, 124, 25–29) 6

4. *Ibid.*: “Thou hast commanded all these [to be saved] through thy word […] glory who is before him, Hidden One, blessed Senaon, [he who begat] himself […].” (126, 1–7)

5. *Zostrianos:* “The self-begotten Kalyptos pre-exists because he is an origin of the Autogenes, a god and a forefather, a cause of the Protophanes, a father of the parts that are his. As a divine father he is foreknown: but he is unknown, for he is a power and a father from himself.” (*NH VIII* 1, 20, 4–14) 7

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3 *Refutation of all Heresies* (Study 2, note 13), V 2.
6 J.M. Robinson (transl.), in *The Nag Hammadi Library, op. cit.* (Study 2, note 6), p. 400.
7 J.N. Sieber (transl.), in *The Nag Hammadi Library, op. cit.* (Study 2, note 6), p. 409.