JOHANNINE BACKGROUND OF THE BEING-LIFE-MIND TRIAD

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Pierre Hadot argued famously that whereas Porphyry received the being-life-mind triad from Plotinus, and went on to systematize it in light of the *Chaldaean Oracles*, Plotinus himself received a relatively developed version of the triad from a piece of earlier, Platonic school exegesis of *Sophist* 248E–249A, presumably available to him in a now lost handbook. While I do agree with Hadot that Plotinus must have inherited this noetic triad because he uses it from his earliest work onward without ever justifying its use or connection to the *Sophist* passage, I do not agree with Hadot that the triad originated in Platonic school exegesis of *Sophist*, or that the systematization of the triad was carried out in light of the *Chaldaean Oracles* by Porphyry. Rather, a fresh look at Neopythagorean speculations, together with a study of Gnostic sources from Nag Hammadi that were not yet available to Hadot, shows the originators and systematizers of the being-life-mind triad to have been Sethian Gnostics (a branch of Classic Gnosticism) who were influenced by Stoicizing Neopythagorean monism and especially by Johannine Christology, interpreted in light of Gen 1–5.

In the following, I will first examine Plotinus’ own use of the being-life-mind triad. I will then investigate the triad’s use in four documents that are difficult to date precisely, but which are roughly contemporaneous with, though probably earlier than Plotinus, viz., the *Anonymous Parmenides Commentary*, the source common to Marius Victorinus and Zostrianos, as well as the two Sethian tractates read in Plotinus’ seminars, *Allogenes* and

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3. For Sethianism, see the classic work of Schenke 1974; 1981, as well as its important development by Turner 2001. For Classic Gnosticism as an enlargement and remodeling of Schenke’s Sethianism, see Layton 1987; and Rasimus 2009.
4. I have argued earlier that Sethians were the probable originators of the being-life-mind triad, and, following Hadot, that the triad contains considerable Stoic influence. See Rasimus 2010a and 2010b.
Zostrianos itself. All these documents contain a developed version of the triad.\(^5\) Next, I will analyze Neopythagorean monistic derivational schemes, developed from the first or second century BCE onwards. These were important precursors to the being-life-mind triad but, as of yet, show no traces of the triad itself. Finally, I will show that while a number of second-century CE sources from the “fringes” of Platonism (such as the Chaldaean Oracles and Valentinian texts) were greatly influenced by these Neopythagorean solutions, the Sethian Apocryphon of John shows a definite new development towards the being-life-mind triad, although it does not yet contain the systematized triad of the later documents. This early Sethian precursor to the triad grew out of the author’s peculiar interest in Johannine Christology and Genesis speculations, influenced by Neopythagorean monism which itself naturally abode well with biblical monotheism. The seeds of the triad sown in the Apocryphon of John then came to fruition in later Sethian texts, most notably in Allogenes and Zostrianos which circulated in Plotinus’ seminars. The maturation of the Apocryphon’s seminal speculations may have been partially catalyzed by a fruitful encounter between Sethians and the young Plotinus, with Plotinus himself most likely connecting the triad to the Sophist passage.

1. PLOTINUS AND THE BEING-LIFE-MIND TRIAD

Plotinus uses the being-life-mind (τὸ ὄν-ζωή-νοῦς) triad to describe the function and derivation of his second hypostasis.\(^6\) While the first hypostasis, the One, is beyond being, intellect, and all opposition, the second hypostasis is a unity-in-multiplicity, a self-thinking intellect. The triad’s third member (νοῦς) denotes the thinking subject, the first member (τὸ ὄν) the object of its thinking, and the median member (ζωή) the thinking activity itself.\(^7\) Without this mediating “life,” which is the vitalizing movement of thought, intellect could not exist. Indeed, “life” allows the very coming into being of the second hypostasis. Due to his insistence on the absolute transcendence

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\(^5\) I will not investigate the triad in Porphyry’s uncontested works, because I have done so elsewhere (Rasimus 2010a) and because I am here analyzing Hadot’s theory of the pre-Plotinian roots of the triad, which excludes Porphyry as a source. By Porphyry’s “uncontested works” I mean the Porphyrian corpus minus the Anonymous Parmenides Commentary and the 89 fragments Hadot (1968) identified in Victorinus’ works.

\(^6\) See Hadot 1960, esp. 130–141.