

# Hermetic Dualism? CH. VI. against the Background of Nag Hammadi Dualistic Gnosticism

by  
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Cosmological dualism is generally considered a prime factor in the conceptual framework of the complex phenomenon of gnosticism. This understanding is often based on the distinction between on the one hand an absolute transcendent God untainted by matter and on the other hand a creator God responsible for the creation of the world. In the Nag Hammadi literature this type of cosmology is found in texts such as "The Hypostasis of the Archons" (NHC.II,4) and "The Apocryphon of John" (NHC.II,1), texts which are generally considered to express classical gnostic mythology. In "The Apocryphon of John", as is well known, the physical world is due to Sophia's wish to create. Since she created without the approval of either "the great Spirit" or her consort the result was "imperfect and different from her appearance" (NHC.II,1,10,4)<sup>1</sup>, i.e. a monstrous being, the creator-God Yaldabaoth. By his own hand he created yet another line of aeons and authorities (NHC.II,1,10,19ff). In The Hypostasis of the Archons, where the creation of the world as an image of heaven is likewise blamed on Sophia's error, a veil separates the lower world from the higher aeons, and thus the light of incorruption is prevented from shining through to the lower world – that world which is a product of the perverted demiurge and ruled by the stupid archons (NHC.II,4,94,5ff).

At the centre of this type of gnostic cosmolo-

gy is the distinction between the misery of a world which was not meant to be, but was created because of a mistake (by an incompetent demiurge), and the transcendent world; a distinction which in "The Hypostasis of the Archons" is given a physical expression in the veil which separates the two realms. But in the Nag Hammadi literature there are texts where this fundamental dualistic conception of the world is absent, where the creation of the world is not due to a mistake. Contrary to what we would expect to find in gnostic literature we find expressions in two of the hermetic tractates in NHC VI which explicitly state that the highest God is also the creator God. In "The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth" (NHC.VI, 6)<sup>2</sup> the highest God is called "the father of the universe" (53, 29-30), "He is the one whose will begets life for the forms in every place (55, 31-33), His nature gives form to substance" (55, 33-34) and "He created everything" (56, 9). In "The prayer of Thanksgiving", NHC.VI,7, he is among other things called "the womb of every creature" (64,26).

However, this is less of a surprise if we bear in mind that among the hermetic tractates known before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts, we nowhere find that the world has been created by an evil demiurge, even though there are treatises such as CH.VI that seem to come close to the negative cosmologies of the gnostics<sup>3</sup>.

Dualism has nevertheless been a key concept in the study of hermetism, too. Since Bousset's review of Krölls book "Die Lehren des Hermes Trismegistos"<sup>4</sup>, it has been generally assumed that in *Corpus Hermeticum* two ideas are advanced relating to the question of cosmology, a dualistic idea versus a monistic one, or transcendence versus immanence – a difference which Festugière describes as a "curieuse anomalie"<sup>5</sup>.

Going along the lines of Bousset, A.-J. Festugière states that in *Corpus Hermeticum*, there are two incompatible doctrines concerning the view of God and the world:

"Dans l'une de ces doctrines, le monde est pénétré par la divinité, donc beau et bon: par la contemplation de ce monde on atteint Dieu (V, VIII, IX). Dans l'autre doctrine, le monde est essentiellement mauvais, il n'est pas l'oeuvre de Dieu, en tout cas, du Premier Dieu, car ce Premier Dieu se tient infiniment au-dessus de toute matière, il est caché dans le mystère de son être: On ne peut donc atteindre Dieu qu'en fuyant le monde, on doit se comporter ici-bas comme un étranger (I, IV, VI, VII, XIII)"<sup>6</sup>.

Referring to CH.VI,4, Festugière describes "the world" of the hermetic theology as "la totalité du mal"<sup>7</sup> and he finds that:

"On peut dire d'une manière générale que, dans la gnose, Dieu et matière s'opposent comme deux principes également coexistants, comme un Dieu et un anti-Dieu, et que donc, dans la gnose, le dualisme est absolu ..."<sup>8</sup>.

"... dans la gnose, on aboutit nécessairement à une conception pessimiste du monde et de la vie."<sup>9</sup>.

The assumption of two incompatible doctrines has further consequences for the understanding of the "Sitz im Leben" of the hermetic tractates.

It is the main reason for Festugière's opposition to the idea of the existence of a religious hermetic brotherhood, since he finds that they can not lead to the same morality. He likewise finds the absence of a religious brotherhood confirmed by the lack of traces of ritual and organization in the hermetic tractates<sup>10</sup>.

Recent research, however, has shown that we do find elements that indicate the existence of a hermetic community<sup>11</sup> and these indications are supported by the research by J.-P. Mahé and G. Fowden which has made it clear that it is a mistake to divide the *Hermetica* into two incompatible doctrines since hermetism is not a system but a way<sup>12</sup>. To walk the way requires spiritual guidance and this requires some sort of brotherhood<sup>13</sup>.

Garth Fowden has shown that the differences in world-view from tractate to tractate do not comprise a disparity in the Hermetic system, but that they reflect a teaching and initiation process. According to Fowden, the positive view of the world fits into an early stage of the initiate's work<sup>14</sup>, where, as added by Copenhagen, the physical needs are still great, while the negative view of the world fits into a later stage, closer to gnosis, which implies a release from the body<sup>15</sup>.

Fowden is certainly right in emphasizing that the introduction to knowledge was a gradual process, as can be seen from some of the tractates, but was monism really considered the beginner's stage and dualism a more advanced stage closer to gnosis? This seems to be explicitly contradicted by the monistic tractate CH.IX,4 pointing out that for the enlightened person all things are good, even things that others find evil. To say the least, the world-view foreseen for the person who has gnosis is not dualistic, but rather has monistic traits. Thus it is at least open to doubt whether it is possible to arrange the tractates in a more or less elaborated order, in which the degree of dualism corresponds to the degree of insight. Two "du-

alistic" tractates, CH.VI and VII, are clearly marked out as missionary texts and would thus be addressed to beginners. If it is possible to use the so-called monistic and dualistic traits of the tractates as attitudes to be adapted as one walks along "the road of immortality" it must be the other way around, so that "the way" starts with the dualistic and ends with the monistic tractates.

On the whole, it is a question whether – or to what degree – it makes sense to use concepts such as monism and dualism in relation to the hermetic writings. It appears to me that the words monism and dualism have often been used as a kind of dogma-finding device, sometimes obscuring more than they explained. In order for the word dualism to be helpful we need to be explicit about its content, and this means that we must have a definition of the concept which is clearcut and easily identifiable. Such a definition is offered by U.Bianchi.

In Bianchi's definition dualism is exclusively connected to dichotomies which "involve the duality or polarity of causal principles" involved in cosmogony and anthropogony which means that the concept does not involve "ethical dualism, stressing the moral opposition between good and evil, and their respective protagonists ... unless good and evil are also connected with opposite ontological principles"<sup>16</sup>. The definition has the advantage that it becomes relatively easy to ascertain whether or not a given tractate is an exponent of a cosmogonic or anthropogonic dualism since we do not have to consider whether an attitude to e.g. the world is sufficiently pessimistic to be called dualistic. Instead we may concentrate on trying to understand why the writer writes as he does, and what he seeks to gain from it.

With this as a point of departure I intend in the following to question the assumed division through an analysis of C.H.VI, which is generally considered an expression of a dualistic cos-

mology, and to show that this view is inadequate. The hypothesis is that the cosmological dualism in this tractate is only apparent and that a closer study of the tractate will show that the cosmology is probably monistic. The reason why the tractate has been considered dualistic is threefold: 1) an inconsistent use of the concept of dualism, 2) that the individual statements of the tractate have not been seen in their context, and 3) that no attempt has been made to identify the author's intentions in writing the tractates in the actual way chosen. This last point is important because it seems that the apparent cosmological dualism of the tractate is due to its "Sitz im Leben".

### Tractate VI

What distinguishes tractate VI, according to W. Scott, from the others in *Corpus Hermeticum* is its pessimistic tone, and he finds that the writer of the tractate insists that nothing good or beautiful can be found in the world in which we live; we can, through knowing God, know the good and the beautiful, but even for those who have gnosis, as long as they are in their bodies, the good and the beautiful are unattainable. Scott calls this a radical condemnation of cosmos and all things in it<sup>17</sup>.

It is true that there are many statements such as the following that point in this direction:

"The good, Asclepius, is in nothing except in God alone", (§1)

"... things begotten are full of passions, but where there is passion, there is no good to be found, and, where the good is, there is not a single passion", (§2)

"Material body, squeezed on all sides by vice, sufferings pains, longings, angry feelings, delusions and mindless opinions, has no room for the good", (§3)

“... it is impossible for the good to exist in the cosmos. For the cosmos is a plenitude of vice, as God is a plenitude of the good”, (§4)

“... God’s essence ... is the beautiful, but the beautiful and the good are not to be detected in any of the things in the cosmos”, (§4)

Such passages convey a certain denigration of the cosmos, but this must not lead us to premature conclusions concerning the cosmology. The quotes are taken out of context, and according to Bianchi’s definition of dualism they cannot justify a categorization of the tractate as dualistic. What is of interest is not so much the denigrating statements about the world, but what the writer seeks to gain from his way of expressing himself. This is all the more interesting since it seems that the denigrating statements are at odds with other statements concerning the origin of the world.

The answer to the question why the writer has chosen this way of expressing himself is to be found at the end of the tractate where it is evident that the tractate has been written with the aim of correcting a misinterpretation of the way of things. The tractate concludes as follows:

“Hence, those who remain in ignorance and do not travel the road of reverence dare to say that mankind is beautiful and good, but a human cannot see nor even dream of what the good might be. Mankind has been overrun by every evil, and he believes that evil is good; therefore, he uses evil the more insatiably and fears being deprived of it ...” (§6)

From this passage, it would appear that a group of people believed that man was good and beautiful. These people are described as being

without knowledge and piety and the tractate goes on to state how hopelessly far, with his limited (everyday) intellect, man is from being able to understand what the good is. And this is the reason why the confused souls mistake the evil for good (§6).

One might consider the possibility of identifying the people whom the tractate counters with some definite group, philosophic or religious, but the reference to those “who do not travel the road of reverence” makes it likely that the tractate contests statements of people in general who are unacquainted with the road of Hermes, and thus that the tractate, like CH.VII, is addressing people at the beginning of “the road of immortality”. It is also worth noticing that the character of the mistake which ignorants are guilty of is linked to the hermetic conception of man and his creation. What is important, according to hermetic anthropogony, is that man is considered a copy of the heavenly Anthropos, and as such earthly man cannot be but a pale reflection. Thus, in stating that mankind is beautiful and good the ignorants turn their attention in the wrong direction and in doing so they actually make the same mistake as Anthropos did when he was looking downwards (*παρακύπτω*, CH.I,14) at the material world, falling in love with his own reflection and mistaking the copy for the original.

Thus, the myth of the fall of the Anthropos is a mythological pattern not to be followed. What these people must do instead is to raise their heads (*ἀνακύπτω*, HO.IV,4) and look upwards so that they can get rid of “the irrational impulses” (HO.IV,4)<sup>18</sup> and with it their sinful ignorance of God, (CH.XIII,8).

Accordingly, the “Sitz im Leben” of tractate VI is an attack on people whose understanding of the good differs from that of the author and it is this difference in view about what is good and beautiful which has motivated the author to write as he does. When assessing the trac-

tate, it is important to keep this in mind; it is not a “simple” explanation of the state of things. On the contrary, it disputes other views.

On the basis of this identification of the author’s aim, it is time to look more closely at the other statements in their context in order to investigate 1), which cosmology is behind the claims made in the tractate, and 2), how the good is used in relation to God, the world and evil.

The tractate starts by identifying the good with God. It says that “The good ... is in nothing, except in God alone” (§1a) and although this is a very exclusive fixation of the good to God and as such a presentation of something which might be a point of departure for a dualistic cosmology, the tractate instead goes on to say that “if it is so”, namely that God is the good, “the good must be the substance of all motion (κίνησις) and generation” (§1a). This is emphasized in the following, where it says “nothing is abandoned by it”, where “it” refers to the the good/God, and later that it is “present in the beginning of all things” (§1a). This can hardly be explained in any other way than that creation in one form or another participates in the good/God. That this is a correct understanding is confirmed by the fact that the good is subsequently called “a source of supply” (χορηγός) and “what supplies everything” (χορηγέω) (§1a). χορηγός/χορηγέω are used specifically about those who defray the costs of theatre productions and therefore generally about supplying or equipping somebody with something. Thus it also points to God being behind the world and so does the indication of an emanation from God in the sentence “if indeed there are things preeminently beautiful near to God’s essence, those seem perhaps cleaner and purer to some degree which are part of him” (§4).

For the cosmology, this means both that this world is not the work of some “demiurge” and

that there cannot be absolute opposition between this world and God, since the good is the substance of all motion and generation. Thus, we must dismiss the assumption that the tractate is an exponent of cosmological dualism, both according to Bianchi’s understanding of the concept of dualism in the history of religions and according to Festugière’s understanding of dualism as an absolute opposition between God and matter.

After these introductory comments on cosmology, which are aimed at setting the scene for the real discussion<sup>19</sup>, the author argues in the rest of the tractate, in accordance with its aim, that the only thing which makes sense to call good is God. Thus understood, the aim of the tractate is not to pass on a dualistic or a pessimistic world-view: It is an explanation of the way in which it is meaningful to speak about the good, and closer study will show that for this reason the tractate speaks of the good on two levels – 1) that which is good in every respect and always – and 2) that which is good by participation.

The good which is good in every respect and always can only be found in God: The first half of §1 ends by specifying that the good which supplies everything “is wholly and always good”. And the second part adds that “This good belongs to nothing else except to God alone” (§1b). The reason for this is, although he is “present in the beginning of all things” and “the substance of motion” (κίνησις), that he is not subject to motion, that is change, i.e. ἐπιθυμία, λύπη, ἔρος, ὀργή and ζήλος (§1b). Thus the only quality which belongs to him is the good.

This good, exclusively attached to God, may be contrasted with the good which is good by participation, and this difference is what the rest of the tractate deals with. The good which is good by participation is mixed with passion (πάθος), a quality alien to the good in God.

That is why it is said in paragraph two: “Just as none of these other qualities exists in such a substance, by the same token the good will be found in none of the other substances”. In what follows in §2 it is explained that in those things where God is not, the good is not to be found. This is given its strongest expression in the statement “things begotten are full of passions, but where the good is, there is not a single passion” (§2), and in the image “There is no night where it is day and no day where it is night” (§2).

Expressions such as these make it seem reasonable to argue that a cosmological dualism is expressed in the tractate, but neither does such an argument accord with the conception of dualism as defined by Bianchi, nor is it possible to refer to Festugière’s understanding of the concept, without neglecting the statements in §1 which have shown that there cannot be an absolute opposition between God/the good and the world. Instead the statements of §2 must be seen in relation to what was said earlier in the tractate, namely that when God was called good it meant “wholly and always good”, (§1).

This offers the possibility that something can be good on a lower level or in another way, and this assumption is supported by that which follows the night and day image. This makes it evident that it is by participation in the good, i.e. God, that the world can be good. The passage runs as follows:

“But participation in all things has been given in matter; so also has participation in the good been given. This is how the cosmos is good, in that it also makes all things; <thus,> it is good with respect to the making that it does. In all other respects, however, it is not good”. (§2)

After this has been stated the tractate discusses the use of the good with reference to humanity. Among humans, the good is only relatively good: “Here below, the evil that is not excessive

is the good, and the good is the least amount of evil here below”(§3). As this is the case, it follows that “the good cannot be cleansed of vice here below ..., it no longer remains good. Since it does not remain so, it becomes evil”, (§3). This is so because “the good is in God alone ... or God himself is the good”, (§3).

This reasoning leads to the double conclusion, that the good is only found in God, and that consequently “only the name (ὄνομα) of the good exists among mankind – never the fact/manifestation (ἔργον),” (§3).

When the writer in the following returns to the understanding of the good as synonymous with God, this must be seen in the light of the contrast between ἔργον and ὄνομα, manifestation and name. The famous hermetic sentence “the cosmos is a plenitude of vice, as God is a plenitude of the good” (§4) is not a statement of hermetic dogmas of cosmological dualism, but serves to illustrate that although it makes sense to say that God is in the world, since he is its substance (§1), he is at the same time something completely different from the world, as different as good and vice. The difference is so vast that “the good is not to be detected (καταλαμβάνω) in any of the things in the cosmos” (§4). The reason for this is, that even though the world participates in the substance of the good, it is impossible to seize or comprehend (καταλαμβάνω<sup>20</sup>) the good in the world with the physical eye.

From another tractate we learn that to understand God and the good, one is to look with the eye of the mind instead (CH.V, 2), but the paradox is that the mystical union with God apparently means that the dichotomy of God and the world disappears, which means that a person who has knowledge is able to see God in the world even with his physical eye, CH.V,2;10. However, these things are not a part of the lesson to be learned in CH.VI, but are meant for students, who have travelled further up the road of immortality.

## Conclusion

On the basis of the analysis, I believe that it is possible to conclude that the cosmology which lies behind the tractate is not dualistic, but is more adequately described as monistic. The analysis has shown that it is due to the aim of the tractate: to counter an idea which exclusively attaches the good to mankind and the material world, that the tractate on the face of it has come to stand for an expression of radical dualism. The analysis has also shown that in order to contest the impious and restrict the quality of the good to God the tractate evolves the two concepts concerning the good. In the words of the tractate, it is God who is "wholly and always good"; this is in contrast to "the name of the good, that exists among mankind". It is possible to call the world good, but the world is good in a completely different way and on another level than the ignorants imagine. God is good in himself, and everything else is good as far as it participates in God.

There are various reasons why the tractate has been considered dualistic: 1) The lack of attention given to its "Sitz im Leben", 2) the reading of statements in the tractate without due attention to the line of argument in which they occur, and 3) an unclear understanding of

the concept of dualism, which, used as a dogma-finding device, has obscured the dynamics of the tractate by making us believe that the denigrating statements concerning the cosmos and the pessimistic world-view are to be understood as expressions of the well-known gnostic cosmological dualism. The analysis has shown that this is not the case and that the reason for the denigrating statements is to be found in the fact that the tractate must be located at an early stage on the road of immortality, and thus serves the purpose of conversion.

The analysis also indicates that there is an important difference between the understanding of the cosmos in NH.-texts such as NHC.II, 1 and 4, and that of the hermetic tractates, which is based on the hermetic assumption that the world is created by the unchanging God. The consequence of this is, that the world can not cease to exist, since this would imply a change in the unchangeable God, which is a philosophical and theological impossibility. That this is a reasonable assumption is supported by the absence of statements concerning the end of the world in the hermetic tractates known to us.<sup>21</sup> The world in the Hermetica seems to be an everlasting "divine body" (CH.IV,2).

## Notes

1. The translations quoted are those of Robinson, J.M.: ed.: *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, third rev.ed. New York 1978, and Copenhaver, B.P.: *Hermetica*, Cambridge 1992.
2. Tröger, K.-W.: *Gnosis und Neues Testament*, p.54, 103, Berlin 1973, and Dirkse, P.A., J. Brashler and D.M. Parrott: "Discourse on the eighth and the ninth", p.345, *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2-5 and VI*, HNS XI Leiden 1978, group NHC VI,6 with the dualistic tractates of Corpus Hermeticum; against this see Mahé, J.-P.: *Hermès en Haute-Égypte. Les textes hermétiques de Nag Hammadi et Leur parallèles grecs et latins*, t.I, p.52f., Québec 1978. See also Krause, M.: "Die hermetischen Nag Hammadi Texte" in this vol.
3. Comparing the worldview of the gnostic and the hermetist, Roelof van den Broek ("Gnosticism and Hermetism in Antiquity" p.9-10, *Gnosis and Hermeticism, from Antiquity to modern times*, ed. by van den Broek, R. and W.J. Hanegraff, 1998) states that the gnostics in contrast to the hermetists could only see the world as the work of God's opponent and they did not believe that the world was transparent towards God or that it was essentially divine. However, if we look at e.g. *The Hypostasis of the Archons* it seems that although it is the

- incompetent demiurge who is creating the world, he is in reality doing this like a puppet with God as the puppeteer. Several times we are told that the reason why things happen is the will of God. The result is that even though the world is created by the hand of demiurge, it is still made "after the pattern of all the things above" (NHC.II,4,96,13), see also *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC.II,1,12,34f.). This indicates that also other gnostics apart from the hermetists were able recognize the *typos* of the *pleroma* in the world.
4. Bousset, W.: "Rezension von "Die Lehren des Hermes Trismegistos"", *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen* 176, 1914.
  5. Festugière, A.-J.: *L'Hermetisme*, p.10, Lund 1948.
  6. Festugière, A.-J.: *L'Hermetisme*, p.10, Lund 1948. For a similar classification see Tröger, K.-W.: *Gnosis und Neutestament*, p.102-103, Berlin 1973, For a survey of the classification in older research see Tröger, K.-W.: *Mysterienglaube und Gnosis in Corpus Hermeticum XIII* p.4ff. Berlin 1971. In *Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, t.2, p.XI Festugière distinguishes between optimistic and pessimistic tractates, which results in a somewhat different grouping. E.g. for some reason he groups CH.VI together with the optimistic tractates although he refers to it as pessimistic in t.2, p.11. It is notable that in t.3, p.36 n.3 he states that the gnostic (dualistic) tendency is nowhere present in pure form apart from CH.I and XIII, see also t.4, p.54.
  7. Festugière, A.-J.: *L'Hermetisme*, p.40 Lund 1948.
  8. Festugière, A.-J.: *L'Hermetisme*, p.44 Lund 1948. There are however a number of places in tractates such as IX,4 XIV,7 VI,2 and Asclepius 15, where this dualism appears in a weaker form. Festugière solves this problem in a somewhat unsatisfactory way by stating that these weaknesses are not contained in "les traités proprement gnostiques du Corpus Hermeticum", Festugière, A.-J.: *L'Hermetisme*, p.41 Lund 1948.
  9. Festugière, A.-J.: *L'Hermetisme*, p.45 Lund 1948.
  10. Festugière, A.-J.: *L'Hermetisme*, p.10 Lund 1948.
  11. Giversen, S.: "Hermetic Communities?" *Rethinking Religion, studies in the Hellenistic Process*, ed. Podemann Sørensen, J. Copenhagen 1989.
  12. Fowden, G.: *The Egyptian Hermes: a historical approach to the late pagan mind*, p.103, Cambridge 1986, Mahé, J.-P.: "La voie d'immortalité, à la lumière des *Hermetica* de Nag Hammadi et de découvertes plus récentes", *Vigiliae Christianae* 45 (1991) Leiden. Mahé, J.-P.: *Hermetica Philosophica, Encyclopédie Philosophique Universelle*, t.3,1, dir. par Mattéi, J.-F. Paris 1992.
  13. Fowden, G.: *The Egyptian Hermes: a historical approach to the late pagan mind*, p.98, Cambridge 1986.
  14. Fowden, G.: *The Egyptian Hermes: a historical approach to the late pagan mind*, p.97-104, Cambridge 1986.
  15. Copenhaver, B.P.: *Hermetica*, p.XXXIX, Cambridge 1992.
  16. Bianchi, U.: "Dualism", *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by M. Eliade, New York 1987.
  17. Scott, W.: *Hermetica* vol.II, p.169, Oxford 1925.
  18. See Mahé, J.-P.: "Mental faculties and cosmic levels in *The eighth and the ninth* (NH VI,6) and related hermetic writings" in this vol.
  19. A somewhat similar rhetorical composition can be seen in CH. V, whose purpose is to initiate Tat into the mysteries of the God who is greater than any name: In the first two paragraphs it deals with the opposition between the unbegotten and invisible God on the one hand and on the other the begotten and visible world, created and separated from God. From this dichotomy the tractate moves through the teaching and the mystical experience towards dissolving the dichotomy. So the tractates are similar in that they are both starting out at the same place, but they develop differently because of the different purpose of the tractates.
  20. *A greek-english lexicon of the New Testament*, second ed. revised and augmented by F.Wilbur Gingrich and F.W. Danker from W. Bauer's fifth.edition, 1958.
  21. Concerning *Asclepius* 26, see David N. Wigtill "Incorrect Apocalyptic: The Hermetic 'Asclepius' as an Improvement on the Greek Original", particularly p.2290, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Principat II, 17,4, Berlin, New York 1984.