Neoplatonism as a Framework for Christian Theology: Reconsidering the Trinitarian Ontology of Marius Victorinus

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Abstract: This essay examines the Trinitarianism of Marius Victorinus in relation to the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and Porphyry, and to orthodox understandings of the doctrine. Victorinus always remained a consistent and thorough-going exponent of Neoplatonism. Victorinus' theory is not as far from Plotinus as it might seem; he has essentially the same ontology, but has characterised different components within that ontology as the second and third elements of his triad. Victorinus' doctrine of the Trinity differs from later orthodox formulations of the doctrine such as those found in Augustine and Boethius. He understood consubstantiality in quite different terms to later orthodoxy. His theology, nonetheless, is genuinely Trinitarian; it represents a form of "non-standard Trinitarianism". Victorinus' theory paves the way for the articulation of Christian theology within a Neoplatonist framework, thus opening it to the possibilities inherent in this rich and mystical philosophical system.

1. INTRODUCTION

THE NAME OF MARIUS VICTORINUS (the "Augustine before Augustine") is not well-known in the contemporary Christian world. He was nonetheless an outstanding figure of his age. Born in Africa sometime between 281 and 291, he had become one of the leading Neoplatonist thinkers in Rome by around 350, and his statue was erected in the Forum of Trajan, a rare honour for a philosopher.[1] His conversion to Christianity, which is described in Augustine's *Confessions*, is dated to around 356. In 362 he was forced to stop teaching when Julian the Apostate outlawed the practice by Christians. He made Latin

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1. M. T. Clark, "Introduction", in *Marius Victorinus: Theological Treatises on the Trinity*, in "The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation", vol. 69 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1981) 3-44, 4.

translations of key Neoplatonist texts, some of which were used by Augustine and Boethius.[2] He also wrote various theological and exegetical works. The most significant of these, written in defence of orthodoxy during the Arian controversy, was his *Adversus Arium*.

Adversus Arium has been called "the first systematic exposition of the Trinity".[3] Nonetheless in developing this exposition Victorinus relied heavily upon contemporaneous Neoplatonist thought. In this essay I argue that Victorinus' Trinitarianism represents a unique and under-utilised contribution to Christian philosophical theology. Victorinus' formulation adheres much more rigorously to "orthodox" Neoplatonist ontology than do later Trinitarian theories influenced by Neoplatonism, such as those of Augustine and Boethius. I propose that Victorinus' theory represents an interesting and viable alternative expression of Trinitarianism, which may ultimately prove to be philosophically and theologically defensible.

Although his deep commitment to Neoplatonist metaphysics has never been in dispute,[4] in the past some commentators have claimed that Victorinus abandoned Neoplatonist principles when these con-flicted with Trinitarian orthodoxy.[5] I argue here that a careful reading of Victorinus demonstrates that this is not true. Victorinus remained totally committed to a thorough-going Neoplatonism. Victorinus did not see Neoplatonism as merely providing some useful concepts which may be employed in the service of Trinitarian theology, once the light of revelation had provided some additional information. Rather, he believed that Neoplatonism was itself intrinsically truly Trinitarian, and that a careful philosophical analysis must demonstrate that the orthodox Christian view merely articulated what was already implicit in Plotinus and Porphyry. There is no division of labour between natural and revealed theology. They occupy the same space, and independently each should arrive at the same conclusion. Indeed, for Victorinus, it is this harmony between philosophy and orthodoxy that serves to validate the latter against Arianism.

Plotinus famously argued for the existence of three divine "hypostases". However, as is also well known, in his ontology these hypostases exhibited a hierarchical subordination to each other that is

2 . Clark, "Introduction", 5.

3. P. Henry, "The *Adversus Arium* of Marius Victorinus, the First Systematic Exposition of the Trinity", *Journal of Theological Studies* I (1950) 42-55.

4. Porphyry, "Porphyry", in J. Dillon and L. P. Gerson (trans.), *Neoplatonic Philosophy: Introductory Readings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004) 178-220, 209, translators' note 11.

5. M. T. Clark, "A Neoplatonic Commentary on the Christian Trinity: Marius Victorinus", in D. J. O'Meara (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982) 24-33, 30.

incompatible with Trinitarianism, and, indeed, proved useful for advancing the cause of Arianism. Some past interpreters of Victorinus may have been led astray by the assumption that the elements of the Plotinian (and/or Porphyrian) triad are the same as those in Victorinus' Trinity. Victorinus examined Neoplatonist ontology and found within it a *different* triad, one of more fundamental importance than that elaborated by Plotinus, and one which involves the kind of consubstantiality and equality of nature that Trinitarianism demands.

However, it is also essential to recognise that Victorinus' understanding of consubstantiality differs from standard orthodox formulations of the doctrine. Victorinus' perspective therefore creates difficulties with respect to the boundaries of orthodoxy. It is thoroughly Trinitarian but does not cohere completely with subsequent orthodox developments; it represents a form of "non-standard Trinitarianism". It is neither subordinationist, nor Arian, nor modalist, nor tritheistic; it is genuinely Trinitarian, but it is not absolutely orthodox in the full sense (which largely evolved, and certainly was dogmatically defined, subsequent to his writings in any case). Victorinus' theory suggests the possibility of a thorough-going Neoplatonist expression of Trinitarian theology, thus opening up a paradigm for a mystical Christian theology with a rich philosophical background, and presenting many potential avenues for the establishment of common ground with a number of significant non-Christian religious traditions, including Judaism,[6] Islam,[7] and Hinduism,[8] as well as contemporary Western spiritualities[9].

2. THE OVERALL STRUCTURE OF VICTORINUS' ADAPTATION OF NEOPLATONISM

2.1 Plotinus and Victorinus

In Victorinus[10] the three hypostases of the Trinity[11] are characterised as "To Be" (the Father), the λόγος (the Son), and νοῦς (the Holy Spirit).

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6. T. Rudavsky, "Medieval Jewish Neoplatonism", in D. H. Frank and O. Leaman (eds.), *History of Jewish Philosophy*, in "Routledge History of World Philosophies", vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 1997) 149-87.

7. J. Owens, "The Relevance of Avicennian Neoplatonism", in P. Morewedge (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*, in R. B. Harris (ed.), *Studies in Neoplatonism: Ancient and Modern*, vol. 5 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 41-50.

8. A. M. Wolters, "A Survey of Modern Scholarly Opinion on Plotinus and Indian Thought", in R. B. Harris (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought* (Norfolk: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, 1982) 293-308.

9. See W. J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) 388-91.

10. M. Victorinus, *Marius Victorinus: Theological Treatises on the Trinity*, trans. M. T. Clark, in "The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation", vol. 69 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1981) 179-87.

These do not correspond very precisely to the three hypostases as found in Plotinus, of the One (τὸ ἕν), Intellect (νοῦς), and Soul (ψυχή).[12] In Plotinus, from the One comes forth Intellect, and from Intellect, Soul. This is a strictly "vertical" relationship, in which each hypostasis is less than the one prior to it (καὶ ἔλαττον δὲ ἑαυτοῦ γεννᾷ).[13] Intellect is less than the One, and Soul is less than Intellect. In short, the Plotinian hypostases exhibit a subordination to each other that is unacceptable from a Trinitarian point of view. In Plotinus, the λόγος is the "forming principle" of reality, which has a complex relationship to the hypostases of νοῦς and ψυχή, but is expressed "in" both by means of descent from the highest form down to the plurality of λόγοι manifested in physical reality.[14] Each hypostasis is the λόγος and ἐνέργεια of the preceding one.[15]

2.2 The Influence of Porphyry

One influential explanation for these differences, proposed by Hadot,[16] is that the primary Neoplatonist influence upon Victorinus was Porphyry and not Plotinus. Porphyry's characterisation of the Neo-platonic triad does resemble Victorinus' Trinity to a somewhat greater extent than does the Plotinian version,[17] although the extant writings of Porphyry leave much to be desired in terms of making his position clear. Furthermore, Hadot's case depends rather crucially on his attribution of Porphyrian authorship to the anonymous *Commentary on Parmenides*,[18] since this is where the most striking parallels to Victorinus are found.

Victorinus' preferred manner of distinguishing the Father and the Son is to refer to them as the Pre-existent and the Existent respectively: "It follows that God [i.e. the Father] is the total *Proon* (preexistent) and Jesus is the total *On* (existent)...."[19]

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11. Although he prefers the Latin terms *existentia* and *subsistentia*, rather than the Greek ὑπόστασις; see Clark, "Introduction", 41-42.

12. Plotinus, *Plotini Opera* vol. 2, ed. P. Henry and H. R. Schwyzer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), *Enneads* V.1.10 (200).

13. Plotinus, *Opera* (vol. 2), *Enneads* V.1.6 (194).

14. K. Corrigan, "Essence and Existence in the *Enneads*", in L. P. Gerson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 105-129, 110-111.

15. Plotinus, *Opera* (vol. 2), *Enneads* V.1.6 (194).

16. See Clark, "Introduction", 7-8, and also J. Rist, "Plotinus and Christian Philosophy", in Gerson, *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, 386-413, 412. Unfortunately, Hadot's influential two-volume *magnum opus* on the subject (*Porphyre et Victorinus*, 1968) has never been translated into English.

17. Rist, "Plotinus and Christian Philosophy", 402.

18. See Rist, "Plotinus and Christian Philosophy", 412, and Porphyry, "Porphyry", 205 (translators' introduction to the *Commentary on Parmenides*).

19. Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 62.

The *Commentary on Parmenides* also commonly characterises the first hypostasis as "beyond Being" (ἐπέκεινα οὐσίας καὶ ὄντος),[20] and the second as "Being", in which the first hypostasis participates.[21] This similarity extends to verbal parallels, so that, for example, Dillon and Gerson[22] note that the conjunction of the adjectives ἀνούσιον and ἐνούσιον (used in relation to the first two hypostases) is found only in the *Commentary on Parmenides* and in Victorinus. Furthermore, Porphyry's position in the *Commentary on Parmenides* (assuming that he wrote it), while close to Victorinus, differs from Plotinus, who saw the second hypostasis primarily in terms of Intellect.[23] However, insofar as there is a difference here, it is one only of emphasis, not of substance. The characterisation of the second hypostasis as Being is not alien to Plotinus;[24] on the contrary, it is quite explicit in his writings (the second hypostasis is both τὸ ὄν καὶ νοῦς).[25] However, Plotinus prefers to emphasise its nature as νοῦς. Porphyry (or the author of the *Commentary on Parmenides*, at any rate) emphasises, instead, its character as τὸ ὄν. Victorinus, following him, goes even further and no longer refers to the second hypostasis as νοῦς at all, applying this term instead to the third hypostasis.

The influence of Porphyry on Victorinus can perhaps also be seen with regard to the third hypostasis, the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately the extant writings of Porphyry do not address this subject very directly. However, Augustine refers to a lost work of Porphyry now known only by its Latin title *De Regressu Animae*.[26] He writes:

For if, like Plotinus in his discussion regarding the three principal substances, he [Porphyry] wished us to understand by this third the soul of nature, he would certainly not have given it the middle place between these two, that is, between the Father and the Son. For Plotinus places the soul of nature after the intellect of the Father, while Porphyry, making it the mean, does not place it after, but between the others.[27]

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20. Porphyry, "Porphyry", 209 (translators' note 15).
21. Porphyry, "Porphyry", 209-210.
22. Porphyry, "Porphyry", 209 (translators' note 11).
23. Porphyry, "Porphyry", 208 (translators' note 8).
24. Indeed, the idea that the first principle must transcend Being originates in Plato himself. See J. Whittaker, *Studies in Platonism and Patristic Thought* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984) 91.
25. Plotinus, *Opera* (vol. 2), *Enneads* V.1.10 (200).
26. Porphyry, "Porphyry", 199 (translators' introduction).
27. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. M. Dods, in P. Schaff (ed.), "The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers", series 1, vol. 2, in "The SAGE Digital Library Collections", version 1.0 (Albany: SAGE Software, 1996) 8-1086, book X chapter 23, 430.

If Augustine's representation of Porphyry's work is accurate, then the resemblance to Victorinus is clear. In Victorinus, as will be seen, the Holy Spirit is a "bridge" or mediating hypostasis between the other two. Apart from the comments of Augustine, there are also explicit suggestions in Porphyry that the participation of "the One" (the first hypostasis) in "Being" (the second hypostasis) induces a transformation in both with the synthesis of the two forming a new entity (a kind of *tertium quid*). [28]

2.3 The Relocation of Noῦς from Second to Third Hypostasis

The idea found in Victorinus of characterising the third hypostasis as voῦς (rather than the second hypostasis as in Plotinus) may or may not be found in Porphyry; there has been continuing debate on the subject. [29] Victorinus often characterises his triad in terms of *esse, vivere*, and *intelligere*, a triadic formula which is found in Plato's *Sophist*, [30] but is not unambiguously present in any Neoplatonist writer before Proclus. [31] In any case, whether or not this version of the triad has its explicit origin in Porphyry, he arguably paved the way for this move by shifting the focus in terms of characterising the second hypostasis to Being rather than Intellect. This opened the way for the aspect of Intellect to be located somewhere else, in the third hypostasis; and in moving the third hypostasis to play a mediating role between the first two, Porphyry similarly enhanced the plausibility of characterising it in terms of Intellect. In addition, by moving the third hypostasis to this mediating role, and characterising the first two in terms of pre-existence and existence, Porphyry produced a somewhat more egalitarian theory than Plotinus, without the same extent of vertical subordinationism found in the Plotinian hierarchy, and this made his theory the ideal candidate for development in an orthodox Trinitarian direction. This is not to say that Porphyry affirmed the kind of egalitarian consubstantiality of the three hypostases found in Christian Trinitarianism, but only that his theory was more amenable to such an appropriation than was that of Plotinus.

More importantly, however, Victorinus and Plotinus himself are not so far apart with respect to voῦς as it might superficially appear based

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28. Dillon and Gerson comment on the *Commentary on Parmenides*: "This concept of a mutual "contamination" of the One and Being, which results in their combining to form something that is distinct from either of them, is a subtle and distinctive notion." (Porphyry, "Porphyry", 210, translators' note 18).
29. M. J. Edwards, "Porphyry and the Intelligible Triad", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 110 (1990) 14-25, 14; A. Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition: A Study in Post-Plotinian Neoplatonism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974) 49.
30. Edwards, "Porphyry and the Intelligible Triad", 14.
31. Edwards, "Porphyry and the Intelligible Triad", 14.

on this shift in application of the term from the second to the third hypostases. Both Plotinus and Victorinus agree that νοῦς represents the divine mind, that it represents the "knowing" aspect of deity. That this divine Intellect must be distinct from the One itself is entailed by the fact that eternal truths, being grounded in the Platonic Forms and their necessary relations, are complex, whereas the first principle or ἀρχή must be perfectly simple.[32] Both Plotinus and Victorinus agree that this divine "knowing aspect" or νοῦς may be distinguished from the object of that knowledge (i.e. the totality of that which can be known), which they both agree constitutes the complete manifestation of the λόγος in all its fullness (in all the λόγοι). However, in Victorinus the λόγος has become identified with the second hypostasis of the Trinity, whereas in Plotinus it is not a hypostasis at all. Since "knowing" (νοῦς) has to be distinguished from "what is known" (the λόγος), and since what is known (the λόγος) is now the second hypostasis, then it follows that if νοῦς is to remain a hypostasis, and only three hypostases are to be preserved, then it must be identified with the third of the triad, the Holy Spirit. This necessitates that it have an "ascending" or mediating position between the first two, since the knowing (the Holy Spirit) must connect the knower (the Father) with what is known (the Son).

All this might seem to entail that there should be a sharper distinction in Victorinus between νοῦς and the λόγος than there is in Plotinus, since they have now become distinct hypostases. In Plotinus νοῦς is itself the first λόγος of the One. However, Victorinus brings himself back towards conventional Neoplatonism by emphasising that the third hypostasis is "in" the second. The third hypostasis represents the λόγος engaged in passive ascent back to the Father, rather than in active descent from the Father. The "active" phase of the λόγος (life) in which it is actualised (which is the second hypostasis or λόγος proper), is masculine, whereas the "passive" phase of the λόγος (wisdom) which is νοῦς, is feminine. "For life is descent; wisdom is ascent."[33] The Holy Spirit therefore is the "mother" of Christ.[34] This also allows Victorinus to tie in this feminine νοῦς with the figure of "wisdom" personified in feminine form in Jewish Wisdom literature (e.g. Prov. 1:20, 3:15-18, etc.). This figure of "wisdom" had often also been associated with Christ and the λόγος, and Victorinus accommodates this by emphasising that the third hypostasis is in the second, that the Holy Spirit or νοῦς represents the λόγος in its passive, ascending aspect. Hence Christ, the λόγος, himself is androgynous and incorporates both a masculine and a

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32. Gerson, *Plotinus* (London: Routledge, 1994) 65-66.
33. Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 174-75.
34. Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 184.

feminine aspect or pole ("the *Logos* being himself both male and female"[35]).

2.4 The Distinctive Aspects of Victorinus' System

By insisting that the third hypostasis or νοῦς is "in" the second (the λόγος), therefore, Victorinus is able to describe his system in terms that closely parallel the vocabulary of traditional Neoplatonism. Are there any real differences, then, when all is said and done? There are, indeed, significant differences, but the claim of this paper is that they relate to terminology, rather than ontology. Let us summarise the differences between Victorinus and Plotinus in terms of their triads. In Plotinus, soul or ψυχή is related to νοῦς in the same way that νοῦς is related to the One. In Victorinus, however, νοῦς is related to the One in precisely the *opposite* or *inverse*, "mirror image" mode ("ascent") that the λόγος is related to the One ("descent"). In Victorinus, the relation of ψυχή to νοῦς is *not hypostatic*, and is also the *inverse* of the relation of ψυχή to the λόγος. Whereas, in Plotinus, it is the relation of the λόγος (which represents the "forming principle") to the One which is *not hypostatic*.

From this summary, we can infer that the underlying changes from Plotinus in Victorinus are:

(a) The concept of "hypostasis" has altered in relation to the second hypostasis. It now refers to the entire "motion" of "downwards descent" of the λόγος itself, which spans all the levels in the great hierarchy of being, and not to a particular tier or level within the hierarchy of being.

(b) This necessitates a change in the concept of "hypostasis" in relation to the third hypostasis also. Victorinus introduces a concept of "ascent", or a reversing of the forming motion of the λόγος. This reverse movement is characterised as νοῦς.

(c) νοῦς no longer represents just one particular (the second highest) tier in the hierarchy of being. Instead, like the λόγος in Plotinus, it spans the entire "great chain of being", but it spans it going ("moving") upwards, whereas the λόγος spans it going ("moving") downwards.

In short, what has happened is a change in the concept of *what a hypostasis is* with respect to the second and third hypostases. The last two elements of Victorinus' triad correspond to *different entities* from

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35. Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 193.

those to which the term ὑπόστασις in Plotinus refers. Victorinus' concept of νοῦς seems to correspond in fact, more than to anything else in Plotinus, to his doctrine of the ascent of the soul back to the One.[36] The totality of this ascent, the upwardly directed force which Plotinus describes as the "love" of that which is lower gazing upwards and desiring the One,[37] corresponds with what Victorinus means by νοῦς.

Given this change in relation to what the second and third elements of the triad represent in Victorinus, it is important to note that he carefully avoided using the Greek term ὑπόστασις, preferring instead the Latin *existentia* and *subsistentia*.[38] This might appear somewhat puzzling; he seemingly had every reason to use ὑπόστασις, and he freely employed Greek terminology when inclined to do so. The reasons we might expect him to have used ὑπόστασις include that, on the one hand, it was a standard term in this context within Neoplatonism; and on the other, although there was still some ambiguity surrounding the precise meaning of the term within the Christian community (confusion which was only finally dispelled at the Council of Constantinople[39]) it had become commonly employed amongst orthodox Christians in the West to refer specifically to the three persons of the Trinity (e.g. by Hilary of Poitiers).[40] It seems reasonable to conclude, therefore, that Victorinus' avoidance of the term ὑπόστασις was a deliberate choice on his part designed to distance his theory – or at least his terminology – from that of Plotinus.[41] Victorinus' ontology is, in fact, virtually indistinguishable from Plotinus. It is only his *terminology* that differs; he has chosen to include different *components* of Plotinian ontology in his triad to Plotinus. The entities which Plotinus refers to as ὑπόστασεις are not in Victorinus' Trinity at all, except in the case of the first of the three (the One).

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36. Plotinus, *Plotini Opera* vol. 3, ed. P. Henry and H. R. Schwyzer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), *Enneads* VI.7.34-35 (226-229).

37. See S. Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 65-66.

38. Clark, "Introduction", 42.

39. The final demarcation between the technical terms οὐσια and ὑπόστασις, with the former referring to the common divine nature, and the latter to the persons of the Trinity, came through the influence of the Cappadocian Fathers, and was codified as orthodoxy at the Council of Constantinople in 381. See W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church: From the Beginnings to 461*, 3rd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1991) 173, 175-76.

40. Clark, "Introduction", 42.

41. Clark, "Introduction", 42.

3. THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT IN VICTORINUS

3.1 The Incomprehensibility of the Father

In Victorinus' metaphysics the Father must be identified with the Neoplatonist "One", although he avoids the use of this term in favour of the designations "To Be" and the "Pre-existent".[42] In Victorinus, the Father, or "To Be", is potentiality, not actuality, and hence is prior to all the forms (which are actualised in the λόγος). Victorinus states of the Father[43]:

> You, O God are unknown, you, O God, are incomprehensible;
> But of the unknown and incomprehensible, there is a sort of form without form;
> Hence you are called *Proon* (Preexistent) rather than *On* (Existent)....[44]

What are we to make of the paradoxical statement that the Father has "a sort of form without form"? It seems that Victorinus intends us to construe the Father as the incomprehensible "entity" of which the forms are the visible expression. Hence he speaks of the λόγος, the forming principle, as the "Act" of the Father, as "Begotten" of the Father.

It is important to recognise that what is being maintained by Victorinus with respect to the Father here is not just an incomprehensibility which is due to the limitations of human cognitive finitude or conceptual capacity, but a radical and absolute incomprehensibility.[45]

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42. Christian theologians typically avoided using the term τὸ ἕν for the Father even when they were borrowing their metaphysics from Neoplatonism, simply because that term was associated in the minds of many with both pagan thought, and Arianism (Rist, "Plotinus and Christian Philosophy", 395).

43. The context makes clear that the word "God" here refers directly to the person of the Father, as is usually the case in Victorinus. This is an excerpt from three verses of a hymn: the first verse, cited (in part) above (commencing "You, O God..."), refers to the Father; the second verse (commencing "You, O *Logos*...) refers to the Son, and the third verse, cited below (referenced by note 70, commencing "You, Holy Spirit...") refers to the Holy Spirit. These three verses are introduced by one which states, "One substance therefore is God, *Logos* and Spirit..." It is impossible to argue, therefore, that the entire Trinity is in view in this citation; Victorinus is speaking only of the Father. See Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 332-33. Note also that elsewhere Victorinus insists that the Father is *Proon* whereas the Son is *On* (see quotation referenced by note 17); and here he speaks of "God" as *Proon* but not *On*. Thus the term "God" refers to the Father.

44. Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 332.

45. The Neoplatonists argued that apprehension of the One was possible, but only by means of a kind of direct mystical encounter, not by means of intellectual conceptualisation – κατὰ παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα, Plotinus, *Opera* (vol. 3), *Enneads* VI.9.4 (276). Victorinus, however, seems relatively uninterested in the mystical aspects of Neoplatonism, although that lack of interest may also reflect the context and purpose of his writing (i.e. to rebut Arianism).

He is not merely claiming that we humans lack the concepts to describe the "To Be". He is saying that there is no way that he can be conceptualised, no matter how extensive one's knowledge. God is "inscrutable" and "out of the reach of every rational process", as the unknown author of Pseudo-Dionysius later wrote.[46] Indeed, the Father's essence must remain incomprehensible even to himself. The Father knows himself in the same manner that we do, through the Son, who is the visible expression of the Father's being. "In knowing the Son the Father knows himself."[47]

Given Victorinus' identification of the Father with "the One" of Plotinus and Porphyry, he is necessarily committed to a doctrine of the incomprehensibility of the Father in fairly radical form. Strictly speaking, nothing can be predicated univocally of the Father *per se* at all; we can only describe the λόγος in univocal terms, and in doing so we are describing the Father *phenomenologically*, in terms of his visible expression (which is the λόγος). In describing "deity from view" (θεότης from θέα, in the words of Gregory of Nyssa[48]), we describe the λόγος, who is the visible expression of the "To Be".

The doctrine of divine incomprehensibility involves various difficulties, and, in addition, Christian tradition and scripture impose certain constraints when it is formulated within that context. However, for present purposes these difficulties can be passed over, except in one respect, because it is so crucial to Victorinus' purpose in writing. This concerns the issue of consubstantiality. If the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are to be consubstantial, then – at least as it has generally been interpreted by orthodoxy – it appears to follow that even the incomprehensible Father must have or be, in some sense, substance. In the context of Neoplatonism, this creates a problem, because both Plotinus and Porphyry describe "the One" as being "beyond" οὐσία, which was precisely the term used at Nicaea for "substance", and which was, of course, rendered into Latin (for better or worse) as *substantia*.

It has already been noted that Porphyry[49] described the one as ἐπέκεινα οὐσίας καὶ ὄντος. Similarly, Plotinus stated that οὐσία was

46. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. C. Luibheid, in "The Classics of Western Spirituality" (New York: Paulist Press, 1987) 49-50. Note, however, that there is a difference here: in Victorinus, only the Father is incomprehensible, whereas in Pseudo-Dionysius, all three of the persons of the Trinity possess a shared incomprehensibility (see quotation referenced by note 66).

47. Clark, "Introduction", 16.

48. Gregory of Nyssa, *On "Not Three Gods"*, trans. H. A. Wilson, in P. Schaff (ed.), "The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers", series 2, vol. 5, in "The SAGE Digital Library Collections", version 1.0 (Albany: SAGE Software, 1996) 645-56, 649.

49. Or the author of the *Commentary on Parmenides*.

the offspring of the One, not the One itself: γιγνωσκόμενον δὲ μᾶλλον τῷ ἀπ αὐτοῦ γεννήματι, τῇ οὐσίᾳ.[50]

Rather than characterising the unity or haecceity of the One in a positive manner in terms of "substance", Plotinus insisted instead that speaking of it as a unitary entity involves a purely *negative* characterisation, in which all plurality and compositeness are denied, rather than a positive affirmation that it is a monad or unitary substance.[51]

Victorinus was not unaware of this problem, and it is interesting to note that in his correspondence with Candidus,[52] his "opponent" specifically claims against Trinitarianism and along Neoplatonist lines that the Father cannot be substance. Candidus writes: "For every substance is an effect of God. God therefore is not substance. For through God there is substance. How then, if substance is after him, do we say that God is substance?"[53]

Plotinus and Porphyry would have agreed. Some commentators have claimed that Victorinus does, in fact, assert unequivocally that the Father is substance, and that he therefore "forsakes his Neoplatonism"[54] at this point. A close examination of the text, however, suggests that these commentators are wrong; Victorinus never abandons his Neoplatonism, and he never affirms the substantiality of the Father literally or univocally. While Victorinus does indeed occasionally appear to affirm the Father's substantiality, when these assertions are considered in a wider context, it seems that he means something rather different to what at first might seem to be the case; he is speaking of the substantiality of the Father *analogously*, and not *univocally*. For instance, after arguing that his opponents, in affirming that God has no substance, must mean that he is "wholly above substance", rather than that he is "wholly without substance", [55] Victorinus writes:

> Do we truly understand substance in divine things and thus in God
> as we understand bodies in material things and the soul in

50. Plotinus, *Opera* (vol. 3), *Enneads* VI.9.5.

51. Plotinus, *Plotini Opera*, vol. 1, ed. P. Henry & H. R. Schwyzer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), *Enneads* II.9.1 (203); Plotinus, *Opera* (vol. 2), *Enneads* V.3.14 (227-28); Plotinus, *Opera* (vol. 3), *Enneads* VI.7.38 (231-32), VI.9.5 (278-79).

52. It was once held that Candidus and Victorinus must have shared a common, but no longer extant, philosophical source. However, it is now widely believed that Candidus was a fictional creation of Victorinus himself, a reconstruction of Neo-Arianism in literary form that is designed to act as a target for Victorinus to attack (Clark, "Introduction", 19-20; Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 59, translator's note 1).

53. Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 54.

54. Clark, "A Neoplatonic Commentary on the Christian Trinity", 30.

55. Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 200.

incorporeal things? *For this is substance up there: to be above substance.*[56]

Therefore, one should not fear to affirm substance of God, because when the terms are lacking to speak properly of the first or the highest realities, it is not inappropriate for us to use for our understanding of these intelligibles words that are known to us....[57]

These passages and others suggest that Victorinus speaks of the Father as substance only in analogous terms, not in a precise sense as in the case of other entities. If this were the end of the matter, one might conclude that he rather severely undermines his case against Arianism. After all, if we assert that the Father and the Son are consubstantial, but then qualify this by adding that the substantiality of the Father is only being asserted analogously, whereas the substantiality of the Son is being asserted univocally, we are only a hair's breadth away from the Homoiousians. As will be seen later, however, Victorinus is actually operating with a different concept of consubstantiality altogether and the relation of the Son, the λόγος, to the divine substance is more subtle than mere identity. Recall Victorinus' assertion that the Father is ἀνούσιον whereas the Son is ἐνούσιον. The important point to note here, however, is that Victorinus holds rigorously to the Neoplatonist idea that the Father is not substance, and never surrenders it in order to conform to orthodoxy.

3.2 The Son (λόγος) as "the Form of the Father"

As noted above, in Plotinus the λόγος is the downwardly directed "forming principle", not a hypostasis *per se*. In Victorinus, however, it becomes transformed into the second hypostasis. The λόγος, in both Plotinus and Victorinus, is the cause of all physical realities.[58] This idea fits well with the Christian idea of an incarnating λόγος, derived primarily from the Gospel of John. Predictably, therefore, Victorinus cites this book far more than any other in the canon; indeed, citations from John in Victorinus are roughly equivalent in number to those from the entire remainder of the New Testament.[59] Also important are certain passages in the Pauline epistles (and especially the deutero-Pauline epistles of Colossians and Ephesians) which portray Christ as "the first

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56. Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 201, emphasis added.
57. Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 201.
58. M. F. Wagner, "Plotinus on the Nature of Physical Reality", in Gerson, *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, 130-70, 136, 156; Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 161.
59. Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 354-56.

born of all Creation" (Col. 1:15, cited 8 times by Victorinus),[60] and which assert that "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (verse 17, also cited 8 times).[61] Such descriptions sit very well with Victorinus' concept of the λόγος, although it also tends in the direction of an emanationist panentheism rather than theism, by blurring the distinction between the λόγος and the created order.[62]

To lessen implications of panentheism, in Victorinus the λόγος is argued to have an "inner" and an "outer" aspect. The "inner" aspect consists of the forms as they exist timelessly in the mind of God, interior to God, prior to their expression in creation in physical reality.[63] The "outer" aspect consists of the λόγος expressed in creation and incarnation. The λόγος is the "actuality" of the Father's potentiality. Given that the λόγος is the "To Act" of the Father's "To Be", orthodox Christian theology, and in particular the doctrine of *ex nihilo* creation, would seem to require a sharp distinction between the "Act" involved in manifesting the inner aspect of the Logos (begetting) from the "Act" involved in manifesting its outer aspect (creating). This distinction is not something that can be explored further in this paper.

Victorinus' theory implies that the Son is not incomprehensible,[64] but only the Father. This vertical distinction between them, inherited from Neoplatonism, might seem somewhat at odds with the orthodox idea that the Father and the Son are both fully and equally God. In most subsequent orthodox thought incomprehensibility came to be regarded as an attribute of deity *per se* (as much as, say, omniscience or omnipotence). Later Western formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity abandoned Victorinus' vertical distinction between Father and Son in these terms; it is not found in either Augustine[65] or Boethius.[66] Atherton distinguishes the orthodox Trinitarian view from the Neoplatonist perspective as follows: "The trinitarian ἀρχή, by contrast [with

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60. Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 357.

61. Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 357.

62. "The model for creation [in Victorinus] is Neoplatonic emanation" (Clark, "Introduction", 16).

63. Clark, "Introduction", 25.

64. Nor, indeed, perfectly simple.

65. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, trans. A. W. Haddan, in P. Schaff (ed.), "The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers", series 1, vol. 3, in "The SAGE Digital Library Collections", version 1.0 (Albany: SAGE Software, 1996) 5-448, book V chapter 5, 166-167; book V chapter 8, 171-72.

66. Boethius, *The Theological Tractates and the Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand (London: William Heinemann, 1918) 27-31.

Neoplatonism], appears as an attempt to reconcile the requirement of unity with that of difference within the principle itself."[67]

If that is true, then we would have to classify Victorinus as a Neoplatonist rather than a Trinitarian, because for Victorinus, like Plotinus, the ἀρχή was absolutely without difference, and corresponded only to the person of the Father within the Trinity. In line with Atherton's characterisation, later Christian appropriations of Neoplatonism tended to identify "the One" with the divine nature shared by all three persons of the Trinity, and not just with the person of the Father exclusively – so, for example, Pseudo-Dionysius writes, "with a transcendent fecundity it [the One] is manifested as 'three persons'."[68]

Nonetheless, despite the fact that it was eclipsed by later developments within orthodoxy, there is no question that Victorinus' doctrine of the Father as hidden and revealed only in the Son has precedent in Christian scripture, especially in the Gospel of John (e.g. 1:18; 14:9). It provides Victorinus with important passages which he can turn to in support of his doctrine of the relationship between the Father and the Son in terms of comprehensibility. Furthermore, the claim that incomprehensibility is an attribute of deity *per se*, and therefore must be held in common by all the persons of the Trinity, presupposes a different ontology and concept of consubstantiality to that held by Victorinus (his is a "non-standard Trinitarianism"). This will be discussed in more detail later.

3.3 The Holy Spirit (νοῦς)

As noted in section 2.4, the Holy Spirit or νοῦς represents the reversal of the downwardly directed forming principle, the λόγος. It is an ascent from the forms back to the One. However, since the λόγος includes not just the downwardly directed forming principle, but also the forms themselves, the νοῦς might by comparison seem somewhat insubstantial, since it seems to merely represent the relaxation or ascent back to the One. However, νοῦς consists in the *knowing* of the forms by the One. The One is the *knower*, the λόγος is *what is known*, and the νοῦς is *the knowing*. The νοῦς can be thought of as the intentional connections between what is known and the knower, as the "directedness" or "aboutness" of knowledge.

Victorinus has much less to say about the Holy Spirit than he does about either the Father or the Son, which is not surprising given the

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67. J. P. Atherton, "The Neoplatonic 'One' and the Trinitarian 'ARXH'", in R. B. Harris (ed.), *The Significance of Neoplatonism* (Norfolk: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, 1976) 173-85, 174-75.
68. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, 51.

context of his writings, since the Arian controversy was focussed almost entirely on the relation of the Father to the Son. This lacuna with respect to the Holy Spirit leads to a degree of ambiguity in his writing on the subject, so that it is necessary to fill in the gaps somewhat and attempt to reconstruct what his position might have been. It has already been noted (section 2.4) that the ascending impulse which represents the Holy Spirit probably corresponds most closely to the concept of the ascent of the soul back to the One in Plotinus. This claim is also supported by the fact that the third hypostasis in Plotinus is ψυχή or soul. This allows us to make a close connection, although not an identification, between the third hypostasis in Plotinus and that in Victorinus, in terms of ψυχή; in the former, the third hypostasis *is* ψυχή, whereas in the latter, the third hypostasis is *the principle of motion of* ψυχή *in its ascent back towards the One*.

This ascent is described in Plotinus as a turning away from the sensuous world and its desires, towards the higher world of intellectual contemplation of the Forms; and through mystical awareness and love for the Good (the One), the soul eventually rises through the realm of Intellect and ultimately unites with the One,[69] having reached the journey's end (τέλος ἂν ἔχοι τῆς πορείας).[70]

Just as the λόγος is the downwardly directed "forming principle" that brings all of physical reality into being,[71] and is a principle that tends towards increasing complexity and determinateness, so in Victorinus the νοῦς seems to represent the upwardly directed principle of "escape" from physical reality, towards decreasing complexity and determinateness, and eventual union with the One. Victorinus emphasises that the Holy Spirit constitutes the love of the λόγος for the One, and the principle of union between them:

> You, Holy Spirit, are a bond; but a bond is whatever unites two;
> In order to unite all, you first unite the two;
> You, the third, are the embrace of the two; embrace identified with the one, since you make the two one.[72]

In Plotinus, the ascent of the soul seems to be a result of its own effort, its wilful determination to turn away from the temptations of the sensual world, its choosing to know the Good. Nonetheless, the *capacity* or *possibility* for this turning towards the higher realms must be inherent

69. J. Bussanich, "Plotinus's metaphysics of the One", in Gerson, *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, 38-65, 56-57.
70. Plotinus, *Opera* (vol. 3), *Enneads* VI.9.11 (290).
71. Wagner, "Plotinus on the nature of physical reality", 136, 156.
72. Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 333.

in the nature of soul. This freedom or power to turn towards the One is divine, and is grounded in the unfallen part of the soul.[73] It seems a reasonable move to assert that this divine impulse to ascend back towards the One, is a unitary principle or potency, in much the same way as the λόγος is. If it is reasonable to assert that the pure unformed potentiality of the One has a creative potency or principle that actualises the Forms, it may also be reasonable to assert that the actualised Forms themselves have a dissipative tendency that dissolves them back into the One. The λόγος is the "forming principle", but the νοῦς is the "unforming priniciple". From this we can also see how νοῦς could be asserted to be in the λόγος. If this "unforming principle" is an expression of actuality, then since the λόγος brings actuality into being, the "unforming principle" or νοῦς must be a potentiality within the λόγος itself. In actualising the Forms the λόγος generates the νοῦς, just as the pure potentiality of the One begat the λόγος.[74]

In this concept of the Holy Spirit as the "unforming principle", drawing each individual ψυχή back to the One, we create the possibility for the Christian doctrine of salvation as being based on grace, rather than merely works or individual effort (as sometimes appears to be the case in Plotinus). It is the work of the Holy Spirit that draws each individual soul back towards its source. In light of these considerations, the model presented above seems to be the best way to understand what Victorinus asserts about the Holy Spirit from the context of Neoplatonist metaphysics.

4. THE DOCTRINE OF CONSUBSTANTIALITY IN VICTORINUS

4.1 The Divine Substance as the Totality of Being

From a Trinitarian point of view, the crucial question that arises from out of all this concerns how, on Victorinus' view, the three hypostases of the One, the λόγος and the Holy Spirit (νοῦς) can be consubstantial. The answer seems to be as follows. The λόγος is the "forming principle" itself. The νοῦς, on the speculative interpretation of Victorinus discussed above, is the "unforming principle". However, *what* they form, or *what* they unform, is the same in both cases. It is the totality of the great chain of Being, from the Forms of Intellect all the way down to individual souls dwelling in the physical world. It seems that it is this totality of Being that is the common element that the λόγος and the νοῦς both contain "within" them. In Victorinus, therefore, there is a sense in which

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73. G. Leroux, "Human Freedom in the Thought of Plotinus", in Gerson, *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, 292-314, 304.
74. Victorinus, *Theological Treatises*, 82-83.

this totality of Being can be considered the divine substance. Both the λόγος and the νοῦς are something *more* than merely this totality of Being (the former being this Being in "actualisation", and the latter being this Being in "unactualisation" or "dissolution"). In contrast to both, the One is the pure potentiality that generated the λόγος, and hence contained all Being within itself as potentiality. On this basis, then, Victorinus could claim to hold that the three are "consubstantial"; each of the three hypostases contains within itself the totality of Being, but does so in a different mode.[75] The One contains the totality of Being within itself as potentiality; the λόγος contains the totality of Being within itself in its actualisation; and νοῦς contains the totality of Being within itself in its dissolution.

Such a model of consubstantiality would hold that each of the persons of the Trinity represents the one divine substance *in a particular mode* (pure potentiality, actualisation, dissolution). The divine substance itself is, in one sense, "everything" (that is, all Being); every existing being is a part of the one divine substance. However, this totality of Being itself originates in pure potentiality, is actualised as Being, and is also dissolved from Being, and neither potentiality, the actualising moment or the dissolving moment can themselves be characterised as mere Being, as *just* the one divine substance. Neoplatonism rejects the Aristotelian idea of the priority of actuality over potentiality, and asserts the reverse: that actuality is an expression of potentiality, and is secondary to it. This requires that potentiality have some kind of "potency" or creative "force" (a tendency to express its possibilities in actuality), which is identified with the λόγος. This means that the "modes" of potentiality, actualisation, and dissolution, cannot be reduced or accounted for merely in terms of what is actual ("Being").

Hence, Victorinus is, on this interpretation, a kind of panentheist. To be divine is to encompass all that is, and to do so in a manner which transcends it. Each of the persons of the Trinity is therefore fully and equally divine. They each transcend the totality of Being, but do so each in a different mode. On this view, being "divine" is not to be characterised in terms of attributes such as incomprehensibility, simplicity, omniscience, omnipotence, or whatever. To be divine is to be "all in all", to encompass the totality of Being, to express within oneself the fullness of Being. Hence, the irrelevance of the objection that attributing, say, incomprehensibility and simplicity only to the Father, is to deny the deity of the other two persons. Such objections beg the

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75. See M. T. Clark, "Marius Victorinus Afer, Porphyry, and the History of Philosophy", in R. B. Harris (ed.), *The Significance of Neoplatonism* (Norfolk: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, 1976) 265-73, 270.

question, because they presuppose a different ontology of divinity (i.e. "classical theism"). The theological claims of Trinitarianism can be expressed within different metaphysical frameworks; they can be expressed in terms of classical theism, or they can be expressed in terms of Neoplatonism, as Victorinus does. There are many other possibilities. There can be a variety of Trinitarianisms.

4.2 Victorinus and Early Non-Trinitarian Theologies

Whether one classifies Victorinus' theology as "orthodox" or not, will depend upon how strictly one defines the term. For example, if one regards adherence to classical theism, and doctrines like the shared incomprehensibility of all three persons of the Trinity, as a marker of orthodoxy, then he cannot be considered orthodox. On the other hand, if one adopts a broader view, and accepts any genuinely Trinitarian theology as orthodox, then he falls within the definition. Nonetheless, whatever theological critiques one might bring against his theory, it is not legitimate to identify it with any of the conventional non-Trinitarian "heresies"[76] or theologies condemned by the early orthodox community.

Although the persons of the Trinity have been described here as representing "modes of Being" in Victorinus' thought, this does not at all imply that he was a modalistic monarchian. The term "mode" just has a different meaning in the two cases. In modalism (i.e. Sabellianism), there is only one divine person, who presents himself in various modes or functional roles: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, in Victorinus, the various modes of Being *are* the divine persons. The one divine substance, Being, is not personal. It is only Being *in a particular mode* that is personal. Hence, there is no basis for the charge that Victorinus has only one divine person. We might summarise this by saying that in modalism, the triad is seen in terms of three modes (of action) of one divine person, whereas in Victorinus, the triad is seen in terms of three modes (of person) of one divine substance or Being. In Victorinus, and Neoplatonism, personhood is not ultimately grounded in actuality or Being, but always springs from a primitive and irreducible potentiality.

Equally, Victorinus cannot be accused of tritheism. The three modes of Being cannot be referred to as distinct gods, because there is a disanalogy between this case and the case of say, three humans, all of whom instantiate the form "human". Each individual human consists in the form "human" plus accidents, which are potentialities of the form which have been actualised in constituting them as a particular, distinct

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76. This term is used in a historical sense, and no pejorative implications are intended.

individual. Whereas, on Victorinus' view, each of the three persons of the Trinity comprises the divine substance, plus nothing; the divine substance is just present in different modes (potentiality, actualisation, dissolution). These modes do not add anything (that is, any Being, anything actual) to the divine substance or totality of Being. They are not accidents or instantiated potentialities of the form; rather, the form is an expression of the modes, and not vice-versa. There is only one form of divinity – the one divine substance, the totality of Being. But it exists and is instantiated (once only) as an expression of potentiality, through actualisation and in dissolution; it exists in three modes. The simul-taneous (or timeless) presence of the one form in three different modes, and the instantiation of the one form in three discrete objects, are, on Victorinus' metaphysics, two different things.

Finally, Victorinus cannot legitimately be accused of subordination-ism or Arianism. Certainly there is some differentiation in terms of function, so that the Father is the origin/source, the Son is the revelation/action, and the Holy Spirit is the love/union of the two. It does not follow, however, that such differentiation of function, which is grounded in the differences in their various modes of Being, implies any superiority or inferiority between them. In terms of what they each are, they are one, they are the totality of Being, the "all in all". Differences between them relate to differences in the mode in which they encompass the totality of Being, and it does not seem obvious that any one mode should be superior to any other; indeed they each imply the others.

5. CONCLUSION

On the interpretation of his position presented in this essay, Victorinus' Trinitarian theology obviously stands or falls with Neo-platonism. Philosophical arguments for or against Neoplatonism, or classical theism, fall outside the scope of the present work. Crucial philosophical issues include the metaphysics of possibility, possible worlds, and modal logic, the priority of potentiality over actuality, the distinction between unity and Being, and a careful metaphysical characterisation of the three modes of potentiality, actualisation and dissolution.

However, if Neoplatonism is accepted as a defensible metaphysical system, then Victorinus' articulation of Trinitarianism seems itself to be plausible within that framework. Although Victorinus has chosen different features of Neoplatonist ontology from Plotinus as the elements of his triad, the choices he makes are reasonable in terms of conventional Neoplatonist theory. Furthermore, Victorinus' theology opens up an immense and rich field of possibilities in terms of

articulating other elements of Christian theology, such as the incarnation of the λόγος and the hypostatic union, the atonement, grace, eschatology and *theosis*, and so forth, within the framework of a profound and mystical philosophical ontology. It provides an important alternative speculative theological perspective that deserves a place within the orthodox Christian tradition.