

**RESPONDING TO JOHN PHILOPONUS:  
HYPOSTASES, PARTICULAR SUBSTANCES, AND *PERICHORESIS*  
IN THE TRINITY**

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Abstract: This article offers an in-depth discussion of John of Damascus' *Expositio fidei*, where the concept of Trinitarian *perichoresis* appears for the first time. The article identifies the sources on which John drew and describes the ways in which he modified the positions of his predecessors. It suggests that the concept of *perichoresis* is derived from Christology where two natures interpenetrate, or 'become one', and that it is therefore possible that it was the Monophysites who first introduced the concept, and that Chalcedonian theologians learnt it from them.

There has of late been a lively discussion about the concept of Trinitarian *perichoresis* or interpenetration, which makes its first appearance in John of Damascus' *Expositio fidei*.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have sought to make sense of the passage in which this concept is mentioned through comparison with other passages in John's works where he sets out his understanding of key terms such as hypostasis and nature.<sup>2</sup> This article takes a different approach. It offers a close reading of the entire argument of which the statement about Trinitarian *perichoresis* forms an integral part and it identifies its antecedents.<sup>3</sup> It argues that the starting point was discussions of the Philoponian model

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<sup>1</sup> The Pseudo-Cyrrillian treatise *De trinitate*, which has traditionally been regarded as John's source, has been shown to be a late compilation that makes use of John's writings, cf. V. Conticello, 'Pseudo-Cyrril's 'De Ss. Trinitate': A Compilation of Joseph the Philosopher', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 61 (1995), pp. 117-129.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. Cross, 'Perichoresis, Deification, and Christological Predication in John of Damascus', *Mediaeval Studies* 62 (2000), pp. 69-124.

<sup>3</sup> The focus will be exclusively on texts that John used in order to construct his argument. The wider pre-history of Trinitarian *perichoresis* will not be considered. On this topic cf. L. G. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London, 1959), pp. 282-291; J. P. Egan, 'Toward Trinitarian Perichoresis: Saint Gregory the Theologian, Oration 31.14', *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39 (1994), pp. 83-93; M. S. Troiano, 'Il concetto di perichoresis in Gregorio di Nissa', *Studi storico-religiosi* 2 (1978), pp. 81-92;

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of the Trinity where the Father, the Son and the Spirit are conceptualised as three particular substances and the common divine nature is declared to be a mere abstraction. Some of Philoponus' Monophysite and Chalcedonian adversaries defended the oneness of God but conceded that in the case of created being the one nature was indeed just a mental construct. In order to support their argument they claimed that the multitude of hypostatic idioms present in each individual caused the common nature to break up. This framework was irreconcilable with traditional Trinitarian theology as defined by Gregory of Nyssa since Gregory had not only created an analogy between the Trinity and the human species but also argued that the substantial and hypostatic dimensions were entirely separate. However, this does not mean that it was not 'Cappadocian'. Indeed, it was derived from a passage in one of Gregory of Nazianzus' speeches, which is repeatedly quoted in the later texts. John of Damascus took over this framework and adapted it to his needs. He claimed that in created being the multitude of characteristics separated hypostases from each other and thus prevented their being in each other. This is a decidedly odd argument because distinction through idioms was traditionally regarded as the hallmark of hypostasis. Unlike his predecessors John then proceeded to create a complementary statement about God. He declared that in the case of the Trinity the oneness of nature was real and the distinction between hypostases a mental construct without any objective reality. This 'Sabellian' model he then combined with a statement about *perichoresis*. Since Father, Son and Spirit are distinguished by far fewer characteristics than created beings they are not separate from each other and thus can be in each other. In the last part of the article it is argued that this 'heretical' framework was the result of a modification of an existing model that focused on the divine nature in Father, Son and Spirit, declaring it to be one in reality and three in thought. It is suggested that this model was created by Monophysites who derived it from their Christology and that it was only at a later stage adopted by Chalcedonian theologians such as John of Damascus.

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One of the most frequently quoted texts in the Late Patristic discourse is Gregory of Nyssa's treatise *Ad Graecos ex communibus notionibus*.<sup>4</sup> There the Cappadocian bishop

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and D. F. Stramara Jr., 'Gregory of Nyssa's Terminology For Trinitarian Perichoresis', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 52 (1998), pp. 257-263.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Ad Graecos ex communibus notionibus*, ed. F. Mueller, in: *Gregorii Nysseni opera dogmatica minora* (Gregorii Nysseni opera, 3, pt. 1; Leiden, 1958), pp. 19-33. Quotations from this text are found e.g. in Eutychius of Constantinople, *De natura et hypostasi*, tr. P. Ananian, 'L'opuscolo di Eutichio patriarca di Constantinopoli sulla "Distinzione della natura e persona"', in: *Armeniaca. Mélanges d'Études Arméniennes, publiées à l'occasion du 250<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de l'entrée des Pères Mekhitaristes dans l'Île de Saint-Lazare* (1717-1967) (Venice, 1969), pp. 355-382, esp. p. 365.

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defends himself against accusations that he was teaching the existence of three gods in the sense of three separate substances. He declares that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are each substance but that together they are only one substance, and that one can therefore not speak of three gods but only of one. In order to substantiate his claim he proposes an analogy with created being. He argues that the human species also constitutes one substance and that one can therefore say that Peter, Paul and Barnaby are each a human being but not that they are three human beings because they would then also be three particular substances. One of the authors who took note of Gregory's argument was Theodore of Raithou who lived in the late sixth century.<sup>5</sup> In his treatise *Praeparatio* Theodore not only reproduces Gregory's reasoning but also quotes the same passages from the Bible in order to illustrate the points that he is making.<sup>6</sup> Thus one might conclude that he contents himself with restating positions that had been defined two centuries earlier. However, when one turns to the next passage of his treatise one realises that this is not at all the case. There Theodore explains why Scripture does on occasion speak of two or more human beings. The first reason that he offers is already found in Gregory's text. Scripture merely makes a concession to common usage, which is incorrect.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the second reason points into a radically different direction. Questioning all that he has said so far Theodore now claims that it is entirely justified to speak of two human beings because there are real differences within the human nature such as the distinction between male and female.<sup>8</sup> This leads him to the following conclusion:

Πάση φύσει καὶ οὐσίᾳ τῇ μετὰ τὴν ἁγίαν τριάδα τὸ ἐν ἐπινοίᾳ καὶ μόνῃ ὑπάρχει θεωρητόν, τὰ δὲ πολλὰ καὶ τὰ διαιροῦντα ἄλλον ἀπ' ἄλλου καὶ αὐτὸν ἑαυτοῦ ἕκαστον πράγματι καὶ ἐνεργείᾳ πέφυκεν.<sup>9</sup>

In all nature and substance after the holy Trinity **oneness is seen only in the mind** whereas the many and that which separates one from the other and each one from himself exists in reality and actuality.

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<sup>5</sup> Theodore of Raithou, *Praeparatio*, ed. F. Diekamp, *Analecta Patristica. Texte und Abhandlungen zur griechischen Patristik* (Rome, 1938), esp. p. 210, ll. 2-21. On Theodore cf. A. Grillmeier and Th. Hainthaler, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, 2, pt. 3: *Die Kirchen von Jerusalem und Antiochien* (Freiburg, Basel, Vienna, 2002), pp. 117-9.

<sup>6</sup> Both authors quote Psalm 102:15: ἄνθρωπος ὡσεὶ χόρτος αἱ ἡμέραι αὐτοῦ.

<sup>7</sup> Theodore of Raithou, *Praeparatio*, ed. Diekamp, p. 210, ll. 21-26.

<sup>8</sup> Theodore of Raithou, *Praeparatio*, ed. Diekamp, p. 210, ll. 26 - 29

<sup>9</sup> Theodore of Raithou, *Praeparatio*, ed. Diekamp, p. 211, ll. 9-14.

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This statement rules out the realist understanding of the common substance that Gregory of Nyssa had advocated, at least as regards the created order. According to Theodore only individual beings are real whereas the common nature is nothing more than a mental construct and can therefore not bind together the individuals into a unified whole. It is immediately evident that such a framework is in keeping with the model that the philosopher-theologian John Philoponus had devised in the mid-sixth century. In his treatise *De trinitate* Philoponus explains:

However, species and genera are posterior to particular individuals, and - to say it simply - each common thing is constructed by our intellect from particulars. For this reason, the ancients called such things posterior and intellectual (ἐννοηματικά). For, correctly speaking, Peter, John and every individual man are animal and substance, and the same goes for this horse or that ox. However, these names passed from these (particulars) to what is called genera and species, that is, from things which subsist in substance to those which are inferred by our intellect.<sup>10</sup>

It may come as a surprise that a Chalcedonian theologian such as Theodore of Raithou would dismiss the seemingly unassailable authority of Gregory of Nyssa and opt for a model that had been proposed by the universally condemned heretic John Philoponus. In order to find an explanation one must first of all realise that Theodore's statement is a paraphrase of a passage in Gregory of Nazianzus' *Oratio* 31:

Τί δαί, οὐχὶ καὶ παρ' Ἑλλησι, φαῖεν ἅν, μία θεότης, ὡς οἱ τὰ τελεώτερα παρ' ἐκείνοις φιλοσοφοῦντες, καὶ παρ' ἡμῖν ἀνθρωπότης μία, τὸ γένος ἅπαν; ἀλλ' ὁμως θεοὶ πολλοί, καὶ οὐχ εἷς, ὡς δὴ καὶ ἄνθρωποι; ἀλλ' ἐκεῖ μὲν ἡ κοινότης τὸ ἐν ἔχει μόνον ἐπινοία θεωρητόν· τὰ δὲ καθ' ἕκαστον πλεῖστον ἀλλήλων καὶ τῷ χρόνῳ καὶ τοῖς πάθεσι καὶ τῇ δυνάμει μεμερισμένα.<sup>11</sup>

What then, might they say, is there not one divinity also for pagans, as those among them say who engage in more perfect philosophy, and is there not for us one humanity, the whole race? Nevertheless there are many gods and not one, just as there are human beings. But there **that** which is common **has a oneness that is seen only in the mind,**

<sup>10</sup> John Philoponus, *De trinitate*, fr. 1, A. Van Roey, 'Les fragments trithéites de Jean Philopon', *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 11 (1980), pp. 135-163, esp. p. 148, in the translation of C. Erismann, 'The Trinity, Universals, and Particular Substances: Philoponus and Roscelin', *Traditio* 63 (2008), pp. 277-305, esp. p. 291. In his article Erismann gives a concise account of the Tritheist controversy and John's 'nominalist' theological position. Attempts to show that John was not a nominalist have been unsuccessful, cf. Cross, 'Perichoresis, Deification', pp. 76-77; and M. Rashed, *L'héritage aristotélicien. Textes inédits de l'Antiquité* (Paris, 2007), pp. 352-357; esp. p. 356.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 31, *PG* 36, 149B1-C1.

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whereas the individuals are to a very great extent separated from each other through time and affects and power.<sup>12</sup>

It appears that Theodore deliberately chose a statement from Gregory of Nazianzus that conforms to Philoponus' ontological model and at the same time subverts the validity of Gregory of Nyssa's conceptual framework. This raises the question: why did he feel the need to take such a step? An answer presents itself when we turn to an anti-Philoponian *florilegium* from the later sixth century. The anonymous Monophysite author of this *florilegium* quotes the passage from Philoponus' *De trinitate* that I have reproduced above and then adds a series of passages from universally recognised teachers of the church in order to show that Philoponus strays from the Patristic consensus. The first passage is taken from Basil of Caesarea's treatise *De spiritu sancto*:

Ἀλλ' οὐκ ἂν πιστεύοισιν εἰς τοσοῦτον αὐτοῦ παραπληξίας ἐλαύνειν, ὥστε φάναι τὸν Θεὸν τῶν ὄλων, ὡσπερ κοινότητά τινα, λόγῳ μόνῳ θεωρητήν, ἐν οὐδεμιᾷ δὲ ὑποστάσει τὸ εἶναι ἔχουσαν, εἰς τὰ ὑποκείμενα διαιρεῖσθαι.<sup>13</sup>

But I would not believe that they would reach such a height of madness that they say that the God of all is divided into subjects as if he were a commonality **that can only be seen in thought** but has being in no hypostasis.

The purpose of this quotation is clear: it is meant to disprove Philoponus' argument that the divinity is divided into three and that the common nature is a mental construct. The second proof text is then the passage from Gregory of Nazianzus' *Oratio* 31 that served as the model for Theodore's argument. As we have seen, in this passage Gregory makes a distinction: he declares that the ontological model championed by Philoponus cannot be applied to God but at the same time argues that it is valid for created being.<sup>14</sup> This allows for only one explanation. The author of the *florilegium* was prepared to

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<sup>12</sup> There can be no doubt that Theodore's sentence is a paraphrase of Gregory's statement. Not only do both texts contain the same phrase, τὸ ἐν ... μόνον ἐπινοία θεωρητόν, but Theodore also quotes the immediately following passage from Gregory's oration in the same context. Cf. Theodore of Raithou, *Praeparatio*, ed. Diekamp, p. 211, ll. 5-6: πᾶσα φύσις ἢ ἀνωτάτω καὶ μετὰ τὴν τριάδα κἂν ἀπλοῖ τινες ᾧσι; and Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 31, PG 36, 149B14-15: πᾶσα φύσις ἢ ἄνω καὶ μετὰ τὴν τριάδα κἂν ἀπλοῖ τινες ᾧσι.

<sup>13</sup> Van Roey, 'Les fragments trithéites', p. 138. The passage is found in Basil of Caesarea, *De spiritu sancto*, PG 32, 144C3-6.

<sup>14</sup> The two texts were clearly chosen because they correspond to each other, cf. Basil's κοινότητά τινα, λόγῳ μόνῳ θεωρητήν and Gregory's ἡ κοινότης τὸ ἐν ἔχει μόνον ἐπινοία θεωρητόν.

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accept Philoponus' framework in principle and to jettison Gregory of Nyssa's argument that the common nature is real both in God and in creation.<sup>15</sup>

In order to understand why the author of the *florilegium*, and Theodore in his wake, would make this concession we need to turn to another theological work of the time, Leontius of Jerusalem's treatise *Contra Nestorianos*, which most likely dates to the early seventh century.<sup>16</sup> Leontius' Nestorian interlocutor asks how Chalcedonian theologians conceive of the union of the divine Word with the flesh and then presents them with the following options:

Εἰ δὲ τὸν καθόλου ἄνθρωπον ἐθέλοιτε λέγειν, ἢ ἐννοία λαμβάνετε τοῦτον τῷ λόγῳ αὐτὸν ἀποματτόμενοι τῆς οὐσίας ἐκ τῶν καθέκαστα καὶ νοήσει κατέχοντες αὐτὸν ἄνευ τῆς ὑποκειμένης οὐσίας τούτῳ λέγοντες ἐνηθροπηκέναι τὸν θεόν· ἢ αὐτὰ πάντα τὰ καθέκαστα ὑπάρξει ἰδία συνάγοντες ὅποτε πᾶσι σεσαρκῶσθαι δογματίζοντες τὸν ἕνα τῆς τριάδος.<sup>17</sup>

If you want to say 'the universal human being', you either consider it in thought, deriving it through reasoning from the substance of the individuals and, having it in your thought without the underlying substance, you say that God incarnates in it; or you bring together all the individuals, which exist separately, and teach that the one of the Trinity is incarnated in all of them.

Here, too, only the individuals have an objective existence whereas the common nature is reduced to a concept that the human mind abstracts from individuals showing the same properties. Significantly, Leontius of Jerusalem does not question this framework in his refutation of the Nestorian argument.<sup>18</sup> This suggests that Philoponus' model had found wide-spread acceptance and that there was a 'nominalist' groundswell in the Late Patristic discourse, which left no room for a 'real' immanent common nature, at least within the created order.

Theodore's understanding of the common nature thus poses no problems to the reader. Much less clear is what he means by 'the many'. Logic would demand that it is the particular natures whose building plan is identical with the common nature, which

<sup>15</sup> At the same time he rejects Philoponus' analogy between God and creation where the common nature was considered to be a mere mental construct in both spheres.

<sup>16</sup> On Leontius, cf. D. Krausmüller, 'Leontius of Jerusalem, a theologian of the 7th century', *The Journal of Theological Studies* 52 (2001), pp. 637-657.

<sup>17</sup> Leontius of Jerusalem, *Contra Nestorianos* II.6, PG 86, 1544D7-14. The text is possibly corrupt. A more intelligible reading would be ἀποματτόμενοι ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τῶν καθέκαστα.

<sup>18</sup> Leontius of Jerusalem, *Contra Nestorianos* II.6, 1548C7-8. Cf. also *Contra Nestorianos* I.20, 1485D1-2: οὕτω φαμέν τὸν Λόγον ἐκ τῆς ἡμετέρας φύσεως εἰς τὴν ἰδίαν ὑπόστασιν προσλαβέσθαι φύσιν ἰδικὴν τινα.

is derived from them. Such an interpretation is also suggested by Theodore's modification of Gregory of Nyssa's original framework. If one accepts that one can speak of two or three human beings then one must also accept that there are as many substances as there are individuals. However, these substances should then be identical in content and not different from one another. Yet Theodore speaks of differences that distinguish a being from other beings and from itself. This can only refer to hypostases because one person differs from another and a single person changes over time. Accordingly the multitude of idioms found in hypostases would have an impact on the species to which they belong, breaking up the 'oneness of nature'. Such a conceptual framework is irreconcilable with Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian theology where the number of differences between individuals has no impact on the ontological status of the one substance since such differences are posterior to substance.<sup>19</sup> However, this does not mean that it was not 'Cappadocian' since its ultimate source is the passage in Gregory of Nazianzus' *Oratio* 31 on which Theodore has based his argument.

The implications of this framework, and the problems caused by it, become obvious in another passage, which is found in the treatise *Expositio fidei* of the eighth-century theologian John of Damascus.<sup>20</sup> There we read:

Χρηὶ δὲ εἰδέναι, ὅτι ἕτερόν ἐστι τὸ πράγματι θεωρεῖσθαι καὶ ἄλλο τὸ λόγῳ καὶ ἐπινοίᾳ. Ἐπὶ μὲν οὖν πάντων τῶν κτισμάτων ἢ μὲν τῶν ὑποστάσεων διαίρεσις πράγματι θεωρεῖται· πράγματι γὰρ ὁ Πέτρος τοῦ Παύλου κεχωρισμένος θεωρεῖται. Ἡ δὲ κοινότης καὶ ἡ συνάφεια καὶ τὸ ἐν λόγῳ καὶ ἐπινοίᾳ θεωρεῖται. Νοοῦμεν γὰρ τῶ νῶ, ὅτι ὁ Πέτρος καὶ ὁ Παῦλος τῆς αὐτῆς εἰσι φύσεως καὶ κοινὴν μίαν ἔχουσι φύσιν· ἕκαστος γὰρ αὐτῶν ζῶν ἐστι λογικὸν θνητόν, καὶ ἕκαστος σάρξ ἐστὶν ἐμψυχωμένη ψυχῇ λογικῇ τε καὶ νοεῖᾳ. Αὕτη οὖν ἡ κοινὴ φύσις τῶ λόγῳ ἐστὶ θεωρητῆ. Οὐδὲ γὰρ αἱ ὑποστάσεις ἐν ἀλλήλαις εἰσὶν· ἰδίᾳ δὲ ἑκάστη καὶ ἀναμέρος ἡγουν καθ' ἑαυτὴν κεχώρισται πλεῖστα τὰ διαιροῦντα αὐτὴν ἐκ τῆς ἑτέρας ἔχουσα· καὶ γὰρ καὶ τόπῳ διεστήκασιν καὶ χρόνῳ διαφέρουσι καὶ γνώμῃ μερίζονται καὶ ἰσχύι καὶ μορφῇ εἴτουν σχήματι καὶ ἕξει καὶ κράσει καὶ ἀξίᾳ καὶ ἐπιτηδεύματι καὶ πᾶσι τοῖς χαρακτηριστικοῖς ἰδιώμασι, πλεον δὲ πάντων τῶ μὴ ἐν

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the confession of faith of the ex-Tritheite Elias, tr. R. Y. Ebied, A. van Roey and L. R. Wickham, *Peter of Callinicum, Anti-Tritheist Dossier* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 10; Leuven, 1981), p. 60, ll. 21-26: 'I rely on .. Cyril, teacher of highly exact doctrines, who is by no means minded to allow talk of several natures even in respect of us creatures divided both by will, by different places and a myriad different things yet nevertheless attaining consubstantiality.'

<sup>20</sup> On John of Damascus, cf. A. Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford, 2002).

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ἀλλήλαις ἀλλὰ κεχωρισμένως εἶναι. Ὅθεν καὶ δύο καὶ τρεῖς ἄνθρωποι λέγονται καὶ πολλοί. Τοῦτο δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ πάσης ἔστιν ἰδεῖν τῆς κτίσεως.<sup>21</sup>

One needs to know that being seen in reality is something different from being seen in thought and mind. In the case of all created beings, then, **the distinction of the hypostases is seen in reality** (for Peter is in reality seen to be different from Paul) whereas **the commonality and the coherence and the one is seen in thought and mind**. For we conceive in the mind that Peter and Paul are of the same nature and have one common nature. For each of them is a rational mortal animal and each is flesh endowed with a rational and intellectual soul. This common nature, then, is seen in thought. For the hypostases are not in each other, but each is on its own and distinct and separated by itself because it has very many things that separate it from the other. For they are distant in place and different in time and are divided as regards opinion and strength and form, that is, shape and habit and mixture and dignity and occupation, and all the characteristic idioms. But most of all, (sc. they are divided) insofar as they are not in one another but separate. Therefore we speak of two and three human beings and of many. This one can also see in the case of the entire creation.

This passage is clearly an elaboration of Theodore's argument: the complementary phrases τὸ ἐν λόγῳ καὶ ἐπινοίᾳ θεωρεῖται and ἡ ... διαίρεσις πράγματι θεωρεῖται correspond to the statements τὸ ἐν ἐπινοίᾳ καὶ μόνη ὑπάρχει θεωρητόν and τὰ διαιροῦντα ... πράγματι καὶ ἐνεργείᾳ πέφυκεν in the earlier text.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, it presents us with the same conceptual framework. Again we are told that the common nature cannot unify members of the same species in the created order because it is only a mental construct. This time, however, we are also informed how this construct comes into being. It appears when the mind compares the characteristics of concretely existing individuals and realises that some of these individuals resemble each other. These individuals would then be particular substances

<sup>21</sup> John of Damascus, *Exposition of Faith*, 8, ed. B. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, 5 vols (Patristische Texte und Studien, 7, 12, 17, 22, 29, Berlin, New York, 1969-1988), II, p. 28, ll. 223-237.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. also τὰ δὲ πολλὰ καὶ τὰ διαιροῦντα and πλεῖστα τὰ διαιροῦντα. Alternatively the two passages may go back to a common source of which Theodore of Raithou's version is an abbreviated version. Here one can point out that John's ἡ δὲ κοινότης καὶ ἡ συνάφεια καὶ τὸ ἐν λόγῳ καὶ ἐπινοίᾳ θεωρεῖται is in some respects closer to Gregory of Nazianzus' ἡ κοινότης τὸ ἐν ἔχει μόνον ἐπινοίᾳ θεωρητόν than Theodore's τὸ ἐν ἐπινοίᾳ καὶ μόνη ὑπάρχει θεωρητόν. If this is the case it is possible that John borrowed his argument wholesale from an earlier author. Cf. also the shortened version of the argument in F. Diekamp, *Doctrina Patrum de Incarnatione Verbi. Ein griechisches Florilegium aus der Wende des siebenten und achten Jahrhunderts* (Münster, 1907), p. 188, ll. 16-18: ἐφ' ἡμῶν μὲν καὶ ἐπὶ πάντων τῶν ὑπὸ γένεσιν ὄντων ἡ κοινότης λόγῳ καὶ ἐπινοίᾳ θεωρεῖται, τὸ δὲ διηρημένον πράγματι.

since each of them contains the full definition of being. This interpretation finds further corroboration in the statement that there are 'two and three human beings'. Here the reference to human beings in the plural shows again that this is a deliberate modification of Gregory of Nyssa's conceptual framework where 'the human being' denoted the common nature.<sup>23</sup>

Significantly, however, John makes no use of the term 'particular nature' at all. Instead he identifies the individual consistently with the hypostasis, which encompasses all the characteristics that distinguish one member of a species from other members of the same species. The hypostases are then blamed for the lack of a unifying bond. It is declared that such a bond cannot be real because individual differences are too great. This argument, which gainsays the conceptual framework of Gregory of Nyssa, is not new. As we have seen it is already found in the treatise of Theodore of Raithou. More original is John's further claim that there is no real common nature because the hypostases are 'separate by themselves', καθ' ἑαυτὴν κεχώρισται, and not 'in each other', ἐν ἀλλήλαις. This claim is decidedly odd because there was universal agreement that hypostasis is by definition 'separate' and 'by itself'. Leontius of Byzantium had expressed this consensus when he stated that 'the hypostases indicate what is divided .. and what exists by itself', τῶν ὑποστάσεων τὸ διηρημένον ... καὶ τὸ καθ' ἑαυτὸ ὑφ' ἑστῶς δηλουσῶν.<sup>24</sup> If one takes these characteristics away the hypostases cease to exist and one is left with an undistinguished nature.

When we turn to the next part of John's argument we find that these problems are not resolved but rather compounded:

Ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς ἀγίας καὶ ὑπερουσίῳ καὶ πάντων ἐπέκεινα καὶ ἀλήπτου τριάδος τὸ ἀνάπαλιν. Ἐκεῖ γὰρ τὸ μὲν κοινὸν καὶ ἐν πράγματι θεωρεῖται διὰ τε τὸ συναῖδιον καὶ τὸ ταυτὸν τῆς οὐσίας καὶ τῆς ἐνεργείας καὶ τοῦ θελήματος καὶ τὴν τῆς γνώμης σύμπνοιαν τὴν τε τῆς ἐξουσίας καὶ τῆς δυνάμεως καὶ τῆς ἀγαθότητος ταυτότητα—οὐκ εἶπον ὁμοιότητα, ἀλλὰ ταυτότητα—καὶ τὸ ἐν ἕξαλμα τῆς κινήσεως· μία γὰρ οὐσία, μία ἀγαθότης, μία δύναμις, μία θέλησις, μία ἐνέργεια, μία ἐξουσία, μία καὶ ἡ αὐτὴ οὐ τρεῖς ὁμοιοὶ ἀλλήλαις, ἀλλὰ μία καὶ ἡ αὐτὴ κινήσις τῶν τριῶν ὑποστάσεων. Ἐν γὰρ ἕκαστον αὐτῶν

<sup>23</sup> This interpretation has recently been rejected by Cross on the grounds that it would contradict John's other statements about nature and hypostasis, cf. Cross, 'Perichoresis, Deification', p. 85. However, such an argument presupposes that John has developed a coherent ontological model that he then sets out in his various writings. As will be evident from the evidence presented so far it is rather the case that John draws on multiple sources and that he does not necessarily succeed in making the theories he adapts conform with his personal convictions. Thus it is more fruitful to reconstruct the original argument and only then to determine how John has modified it.

<sup>24</sup> Leontius of Byzantium, *Solutiones*, PG 86, 1933A4-6.

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ἔχει πρὸς τὸ ἕτερον οὐχ ἦττον ἢ πρὸς ἑαυτό, τουτέστιν ὅτι κατὰ πάντα ἔν  
 εἰσιν ὁ πατήρ καὶ ὁ υἱὸς καὶ τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα πλὴν τῆς ἀγεννησίας καὶ τῆς  
 γεννήσεως καὶ τῆς ἐκπορεύσεως· **ἐπινοία δὲ τὸ διηρημένον**. Ἐνα γὰρ θεὸν  
 γινώσκουμεν, ἔν μόναις δὲ ταῖς ιδιότησι τῆς τε πατρότητος καὶ τῆς υἰότητος  
 καὶ τῆς ἐκπορεύσεως κατὰ τε τὸ αἴτιον καὶ αἰτιατὸν καὶ τὸ τέλειον τῆς  
 ὑποστάσεως ἦτοι τὸν τῆς ὑπάρξεως τρόπον τὴν διαφορὰν ἐννοοῦμεν. Οὔτε  
 γὰρ τοπικὴν διάστασιν ὡς ἐφ’ ἡμῶν δυνάμεθα ἐπὶ τῆς ἀπεριγράπτου λέγειν  
 θεότητος—ἐν ἀλλήλαις γὰρ αἱ ὑποστάσεις εἰσίν, οὐχ ὥστε συγχεῖσθαι, ἀλλ’  
 ὥστε ἔχουσιν κατὰ τὸν τοῦ κυρίου λόγον· «Ἐγὼ ἐν τῷ πατρὶ, καὶ ὁ πατήρ ἐν  
 ἐμοί», φήσαντος—οὔτε θελήματος διαφορὰν ἢ γνώμης ἢ ἐνεργείας ἢ  
 δυνάμεως ἢ τινος ἑτέρου, ἅτινα τὴν πραγματικὴν καὶ δι’ ὅλου ἐν ἡμῖν  
 γεννώσι διαίρεσιν.<sup>25</sup>

In the case of the holy and supra-substantial and completely transcendent and incomprehensible Trinity the opposite applies. For there **the common and one is seen in reality** because of the co-eternity and the identity of substance and operation and will and the agreement of opinion and the identity of power and strength and goodness - I did not say similarity, but identity - and the one eruption of movement. For (sc. there is) one nature, one goodness, one strength, one will, one operation, one power, one and the same, not three that are similar to each other, but one and the same movement of the three hypostases. For each of them is one as regards the other and as regards itself, that is, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are in all respects one apart from ingeneracy and generation and procession. **However, what is distinguished is only in the mind.** For we know one God and conceptualise the difference only in the properties of paternity and filiality and procession according to cause and result and the completeness of the hypostasis, that is, the mode of existence. For we cannot speak of spatial separation in the case of the uncircumscribed divinity as we can in our case - for the hypostases are in each other, not so as to be confused but so as to hang on each other according to the word of the Lord who said: 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me', - nor (sc. can we speak of) a difference of will or opinion or operation or power or anything else, which produces the real and complete separation in us.

Here John makes an important qualification. The framework that he has set out so far is only valid for the created order, it cannot be applied to God. Such a claim had already been made by Theodore. However, unlike his predecessor, John explains to his readers why the Trinity constitutes a case apart. He claims that in the Trinity the one

<sup>25</sup> John of Damascus, *Exposition of Faith* 8, ed. Kotter, II, p. 28, l. 237-p. 29, l. 258.

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nature is real whereas the distinction into hypostases only exists in the human mind. This is a simple reversal of the previous juxtaposition: ἡ μὲν τῶν ὑποστάσεων διαίρεσις πράγματι θεωρεῖται and ἡ δὲ κοινότης καὶ ἡ συνάφεια καὶ τὸ ἐν λόγῳ καὶ ἐπινοία θεωρεῖται has become τὸ μὲν κοινὸν καὶ ἐν πράγματι θεωρεῖται and ἐπινοία δὲ τὸ διηρημένον. The consequence of this reversal is obvious: the three divine hypostases are denied any objective reality. Such a conceptual framework is not reconcilable with orthodox Trinitarian theology. Indeed it is likely that contemporaries would have regarded it as Sabellian.<sup>26</sup> In a second step John then claims that the divine hypostases are not separate but in each other. As we have already seen this denies the hypostases the function that they had traditionally been given in Trinitarian theology. However, John does not then declare that there are no characteristic idioms, which would distinguish Father, Son and Spirit from one another. Instead he argues that in the divine hypostases there are fewer characteristic marks than in created beings, which therefore have no impact on the substantial dimension. This, too, constitutes a departure from traditional Trinitarian theology where it was argued that even if there is only one hypostatic idiom in each case it would be sufficient to establish separate hypostases and thus preclude their being 'in each other'.<sup>27</sup> Even more problematic is the fact that the two parts of John's argument cannot be reconciled with one another. If the hypostatic differences are real then the distinction between hypostases should also be real and cannot only be a product of the human mind.<sup>28</sup> In order to understand how John could come up with such an extraordinarily confused and manifestly heretical position we need to turn to a creedal statement by Patriarch Sophronius, which is directed against the Sabellians:

Τέλειος θεὸς ὁ πατήρ, τέλειος θεὸς ὁ υἱός, τέλειος θεὸς τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον,  
ἐπειδὴ τὴν αὐτὴν καὶ μίαν ἕκαστον πρόσωπον ἀμέριστον καὶ ἀνελλιπῆ καὶ

<sup>26</sup> This was still the case in the tenth century when Stephen of Nicomedia asked his enemy Symeon the New Theologian how one should distinguish the Father from the Son, in thought or rather in thought. Symeon refused to accept either possibility because he was aware that they were equally heretical. Cf. D. Krausmüller, 'Reconfiguring the Trinity: Symeon the New Theologian, the "Holy Spirit", and the *Imago Trinitatis*', *Byzantion*, 81 (2011), pp. 212-236, esp. p. 234.

<sup>27</sup> This point is repeatedly made by Leontius of Jerusalem, cf. e.g. *Contra Nestorianos* I.28, PG 86, 1493D1-10. However, cf. *De universalibus et trinitate*, 8, ed. Rashed, p. 371, ll. 53-59.

<sup>28</sup> The argument that I have presented so far is entirely at odds with the interpretation offered by Cross, 'Perichoresis, Deification', p. 85: 'There is no sense in which the distinction of the divine persons is only conceptual; likewise, therefore, there is no sense in which the commonness of a created nature is only conceptual'. This interpretation flies in the face of the evidence. The juxtaposition is even clearer in the passage in the *Doctrina patrum* to which I have referred in note 22: ἐπὶ πάντων τῶν ὑπὸ γένεσιν ὄντων ἡ κοινότης λόγῳ καὶ ἐπινοία θεωρεῖται, τὸ δὲ διηρημένον πράγματι. ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς θεότητος τὸ ἀνάπαλιν. ἐκεῖ μὲν οὖν πράγματι τὸ ἐν εὐρίσκεται ..., ἐπινοία δὲ τὸ διηρημένον..

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τελείαν ἔχει θεότητα· καὶ ὡς μὲν θεὸς τὸ αὐτὸ καθέστηκεν ἕκαστον καθ' ἑαυτὸ θεωρούμενον τοῦ νοῦ χωρίζοντος τὰ ἀχώριστα· ὡς δὲ πατὴρ καὶ υἱὸς καὶ πνεῦμα πανάγιον ἕτερον καὶ ἕτερον καὶ ἕτερον λέγεται.<sup>29</sup>

The Father is complete god, the Son is complete god, the Holy Spirit is complete god, because each person has one and the same divinity, which cannot be divided into parts and is not lacking anything and is complete, and as god each of them when seen by itself is the same, with only the mind separating that which cannot be separated, but as Father and Son and All-Holy Spirit it is called another and another and another.

Here we are told that the divinity present in each of the three hypostases is one but that the mind can make a distinction between the divinity in the Father, the divinity in the Son and the divinity in the Spirit.<sup>30</sup> Thus we have a distinction between *πράγματι* and *ἐπινοία* as we have already encountered in John. However, the conceptual framework set out by Sophronius is radically different. Now it is the divine nature that is one 'in reality' and three 'in thought'. Accordingly, the oneness of the common nature is real whereas the distinction between particular substances only exists in the mind. In this juxtaposition the hypostatic idioms play no role at all. They belong to a different plane of being and can therefore be three 'in reality' without endangering the oneness of the divine nature. Such a model is both coherent and orthodox. By contrast, John has confused the divinity present in each of the three hypostases with the hypostases themselves and thus created a Sabellian framework, seemingly without being aware of what he has done.<sup>31</sup> It may well be that he was aware of Sophronius' position and that he modified it in order to make it fit the overall framework that he had inherited from earlier theologians or possibly also because he rejected the notion of a particular nature even if it was defined as a mere mental construct.

Sophronius does not speak about interpenetration but such a notion could be easily accommodated within his framework. Its function would have been to dispel any lingering fears that the distinction between the three particular substances of Father, Son and Spirit might exist not just in the mind. John himself affords us a glimpse of this argument in the following passage:

<sup>29</sup> Sophronius' *Ad Sergium patriarcham*, PG 87, 3158AB; quoted from *Acts of the Sixth Ecumenical Council* (681), ed. R. Riedinger, *Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum*, II.2: *Concilium universale Constantinopolitanum tertium*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1990-1992), I, p. 426, ll. 9-12.

<sup>30</sup> The phrase τοῦ νοῦ χωρίζοντος τὰ ἀχώριστα is borrowed from Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 23, PG 35, 1164A10.

<sup>31</sup> One should note that John was not the only author to speak of interpenetration of hypostases, cf. Anastasius of Antioch, *Sermo* I.66, ed. Sakkos, p. 37, ll. 14-16: ἅμα δὲ θεωροῦνται σὺν ἀλλήλαις αἱ ὑποστάσεις καὶ ἐν ἀλλήλαις ἀχωρίστως τῆς αὐτῆς δόξης ὑπάρχουσαι. Unlike John, however, Anastasius emphasises that hypostases are 'in each other' because of their consubstantiality.

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Διὸ οὐδὲ τρεῖς θεοὺς λέγομεν τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὸν υἱὸν καὶ τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα, ἓνα δὲ μᾶλλον θεόν, τὴν ἁγίαν τριάδα, εἰς ἓν αἴτιον υἱοῦ καὶ πνεύματος ἀναφερομένων, οὐ συντιθεμένων οὐδὲ συναλειφομένων κατὰ τὴν Σαβελλίου συναίρεσιν—ἐνοῦνται γάρ, ὡς ἔφημεν, οὐχ ὥστε συγχεῖσθαι, ἀλλ' ὥστε ἔχεσθαι ἀλλήλων· καὶ τὴν ἐν ἀλλήλαις περιχώρησιν ἔχουσι δίχα πάσης συναλοιφῆς καὶ συμφύρσεως—οὐδὲ ἐξισταμένων ἢ κατ' οὐσίαν τεμνομένων κατὰ τὴν Ἀρείου διαίρεσιν.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore we do not call the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit three Gods, but rather one God, the holy Trinity, where the Son and the Spirit refer back to one cause, and are not composed or mixed up according to the confusion of Sabellius - for, as we have said, they are united not so as to be confused but so as to hang on each other, and they have the penetration in each other without any confusion and mingling - nor are they different or divided as regards substance according to the separation of Arius.

What we have here is a clear distinction between a static model - the three elements are contiguous - and a dynamic model - the three elements penetrate each other. It is claimed that these two models together can fend off the Tritheist danger. One can see why mere contiguity might not have been considered sufficient: it resembled uncomfortably closely the unacceptable notion of a mere 'putting-next-to-each-other', *παράθεσις*, of otherwise separate components.<sup>33</sup> As a consequence one could still make out points within the divinity where one element ends and another element begins. Interpenetration breaks down such boundaries and thus reinforces the notion of a continuous divine substance.

In order fully to understand the concept of interpenetration we need to consider that John uses it not only in Trinitarian theology but also in Christology.

Διὰ γὰρ τὴν καθ' ὑπόστασιν ἔνωσιν ἢ σὰρξ τεθεῶσθαι λέγεται καὶ θεὸς γενέσθαι καὶ ὁμόθεος τῷ λόγῳ καὶ ὁ θεὸς λόγος σαρκωθῆναι καὶ ἄνθρωπος γενέσθαι καὶ κτίσμα λέγεσθαι καὶ ἔσχατος καλεῖσθαι, οὐχ ὡς τῶν δύο φύσεων μεταβληθεισῶν εἰς μίαν φύσιν σύνθετον (ἀδύνατον γὰρ ἐν μιᾷ φύσει ἅμα τὰ ἐναντία φυσικὰ γενέσθαι), ἀλλ' ὡς τῶν δύο φύσεων καθ'

<sup>32</sup> John of Damascus, *Exposition of Faith* 8, ed. Kotter, II, p. 29, ll. 258-265.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. e.g. Leontius of Jerusalem, *Contra Nestorianos* VI.2, PG 86, 1753C11-12: τοπικὴ τε παραθέσει πέρατος θατέρου πρὸς θάτερον ἔνωται ἀλλήλοις.

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ὑπόστασιν ἐνωθεισῶν καὶ τὴν εἰς ἀλλήλας περιχώρησιν ἀσύγχυτον καὶ ἀμετάβλητον ἔχουσῶν.<sup>34</sup>

Because of the union within the hypostasis the flesh is said to be divinised and to become god and equal god with the Word and the God-Word (is said) to be incarnated and to become a human being and to be called creature and to be called the last, not because two natures are changed into one composite nature (for it is impossible for opposite natural qualities to be present at the same time in one nature), but because the two natures are united within a hypostasis and have the penetration into each other in an unconfused and unchangeable manner.

The parallelism between the two models is evident. Here, too, natures are contiguous and penetrate each other.<sup>35</sup> In Christology the concept of *perichoresis* had a long history whereas in Trinitarian theology it makes its first appearance in John's *Expositio fidei*. Even Maximus from whom John borrows so much never employs it.<sup>36</sup> How do we account for this time-lag? Comparison between the two models suggests an answer. It shows that the resemblance between them is not particularly close because in the case of the incarnation the natures themselves are entirely separate and indeed not even consubstantial. Thus one could argue that as long as the divinity was conceived of as one nature the possibility of a transposition did not present itself or alternatively that it was considered problematic because it would have implied a division of the divinity into three natures. This suggests that it was engagement with the Tritheist model that made theologians for the first time see a parallel between the two spheres. Once the bond between the 'divinities' in Father, Son and Spirit had been loosened composition and interpenetration of natures were the natural ways in which to overcome separation and establish unity within God.<sup>37</sup>

However, it needs to be said that the parallel between Christology and Trinitarian theology is not all that obvious within the Chalcedonian theological framework. In the incarnation two natures penetrate each other but remain two whereas in the Trinity three

<sup>34</sup> John of Damascus, *Exposition of Faith* 91, ed. Kotter, II, p. 214, ll. 54-59.

<sup>35</sup> For a detailed discussion cf. J. Stead, 'Perichoresis in the Christological chapters of the "De trinitate" of Pseudo-Cyril of Alexandria', *Dominican Studies* 6 (1953), pp. 12-20.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Cross, 'Perichoresis, Deification', pp. 87-88. When exactly the term *perichoresis* was first used in the sense of interpenetration is a subject of debate. Cf. G. L. Prestige, 'Περιχωρέω and περιχώρησις in the Fathers', *Journal of Theological Studies* 29 (1928), pp. 242-252; and V. Harrison, 'Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers', *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 35 (1991), pp. 53-65. For *perichoresis* in Maximus, cf. also Stead, 'Perichoresis', pp. 18-19.

<sup>37</sup>Significantly, he complements this notion with the 'hanging-on-each-other of operations', ἀλληλουχία τῶν ἐνεργειῶν, in order to exclude any Tritheist misunderstanding, cf. *Sermo* I.25, ed. Sakkos, p. 38, l. 25. Here one is reminded of Anastasius' attempts to establish the unity of the hypostasis of Christ at the level of operation, cf. Grillmeier and Hainthaler, *Jesus der Christus*, 2, pt. 3, pp. 398-400.

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quasi-natures penetrate each other and become one. The resemblance is much closer in the case of the Monophysite framework, which is briefly summarised in Leontius of Byzantium's treatise *Solutiones*:

Τὰς φύσεις μὲν τῇ ἐπινοίᾳ καὶ ἡμεῖς θεωροῦμεν· ἐνώσαντες μὲν οὖν ταύτας  
λοιπὸν μίαν ἄμφω φύσιν καὶ ταύτην σύνθετον εἶναί τε καὶ καλεῖσθαί  
φάμεν.<sup>38</sup>

We, too, see the natures only in thought. Having, then, united them, we henceforth speak of and call both one nature, which is furthermore composite.

Here, too, the one nature exists 'in reality' and the distinction between the two natures only exists in the mind. Thus it can be argued that it was Monophysite enemies of Philoponus who first declared that not only in the incarnation but also in the Trinity several 'natures' unite to form one nature, statically through contiguity and dynamically through interpenetration.<sup>39</sup>

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This article has offered an in-depth discussion of a passage in John of Damascus' *Expositio Fidei* in which the concept of Trinitarian *perichoresis* appears for the first time. It has identified the sources on which John drew and described the ways in which John modified the positions of his forebears. John's argument consists of two parts, which closely correspond to one another. In the first part he declares that in creation only concretely existing individuals are real whereas the oneness of nature is a mere mental construct. The ultimate source for this distinction is the writings of John Philoponus who had denied universals an objective existence. Some of Philoponus' Monophysite and Chalcedonian adversaries were prepared to accept the validity of this framework for the created order. In taking this step they distanced themselves from the position of Gregory of Nyssa who had contended that the species had a reality of its own. Curiously enough the argument with which they supported their position is not derived from Philoponus at all. They claimed that it was the multitude of hypostatic idioms present in individuals that broke up the oneness of nature. Such mixing of the hypostatic and substantial dimensions went against the Patristic consensus, which had been defined by Gregory of Nyssa and which was accepted even by Philoponus. It

<sup>38</sup> Leontius of Byzantium, *Solutiones*, PG 86, 1929D6-9.

<sup>39</sup> This affinity was sensed by Stead, 'Perichoresis', pp. 16-17.

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ultimately goes back to a statement of Gregory of Nazianzus to which Philoponus' adversaries had recourse because Gregory, unlike Philoponus, had denied that this framework was valid for the divinity as well. This same point is made in the second part of John's argument. Although no direct antecedents can be identified for the particular form that this argument takes it is clearly derived from the earlier discussion. John simply reverses the original framework, claiming that in God the oneness of nature is real and the distinction into Father, Son and Spirit only exists in the mind, and then adds that this is so because in the case of God the number of hypostatic idioms is so small that it does not divide the substance. It is evident that this argument is highly problematic because it denies the three divine hypostases objective existence.

It is within this framework that John develops his thoughts about *perichoresis*. He claims that because of the multitude of idioms created hypostases are separate from each other and not in each other whereas the small number of idioms in Father, Son and Spirit precludes such separation and thus permits their being in one another. This is a very odd argument because traditionally separation was regarded as the principal function of hypostatic idioms. It is not found in the texts analysed in the first part of this article. It is likely that at this point John adapted another source that was also engaging with Philoponus' theology. The author of this text would have claimed that the divine nature was one in reality but divided into three in thought. In such a framework the hypostatic idioms play no role. John would then have changed this model by replacing the divinities of Father, Son and Spirit with the hypostases themselves, with the result that his framework took on a 'Sabellian' character. It can further be argued that the concept of *perichoresis* was derived from Christology where two natures interpenetrate. In the same manner the divinity could be understood as three natures that interpenetrate although these natures are not really but only conceptually distinguished from each other. The similarities are particularly obvious in Monophysite Christology where two natures become one, which would be the exact counterpart for the Trinity where three 'natures' become one. Thus it may be that it was the Monophysites who first introduced the concept of *perichoresis* and that Chalcedonian theologians learnt it from them.