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SOME POINTS TO THE EXPLANATION OF THE CONCEPT OF ΟΥΣΙΑ ΘΕΟΥ IN THE HERMETIC LITERATURE

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Abstract: The philosophical problem how the essence of God can be defined and what this substance, if it can be called a substance at all, might be like is present in several treatises of the Corpus Hermeticum and in some philosophical and theological texts of late antiquity.

In my essay I try to find the correct interpretation of the idiom οὐσία θεοῦ in the Hermetic texts with the help of some parallel writings from Jamblich and Sallustius. After the explanation of the relevant texts I conclude that the term οὐσία is used only to the cosmic gods, not to the first principle, and it has the function to connect the absolute transcendent first cause to the material world through the cosmic gods. The main source of this conception is the platonic tradition, as it can be seen not only from the similarity of the content, but from the similar use of the philosophical terms.

Key-words: οὐσιάρχης, οὐσία θεοῦ, Corpus Hermeticum, Asclepius, Sallustius, Numenius, Jamblich, first cause, cosmic gods

a.) The concept in the Hermetic treatises

The philosophical problem how the essence of god can be defined and what this substance, if it can be called a substance at all, might be like is present in several treatises of the Corpus Hermeticum. The expression οὐσία θεοῦ and other related theological questions can be found in CH. II, V, VI and XII.

Two noteworthy facts need to be already taken into consideration. Firstly, that the expression itself is theological meaning that its aim is to define the divine nature and puts the question forward whether god can be described at all. Secondly, it faces the unknown authors with possibilities of the usage of the term itself and the problems originating from its usage. The quotes have been referred to are the following:¹

¹ For the Greek and Latin texts with a French translation see: Corpus Hermeticum, I-IV. Texte établi par A.D. Nock et traduit par A.-J. Festugière. Paris 1946-1954. I used the following English translation: B. Copenhagen, Hermetica. The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction. Cambridge 1992.

CH II 5: ἐὰν μὲν οὖν ἦ θεῖον, οὐσιῶδές ἐστιν. ἐὰν δὲ ἦ θεός, καὶ ἀνουσίαστον γίνεται.

If it is divine, it is something essential; but if it is god, it comes to be even without essence.

CH V 9: εἰ δὲ τί με καὶ τολμηρότερον ἀναγκάζεις εἰπεῖν, τούτου ἐστὶν οὐσία τὸ κύνει πάντα καὶ ποιεῖν καί, ὥσπερ χωρὶς τοῦ ποιοῦντος ἀδύνατόν ἐστι γενέσθαι τι, οὕτω καὶ τοῦτον ἀεὶ [μὴ] εἶναι, εἰ μὴ πάντα ἀεὶ ποιοῦντα.

If you force me to say something still more daring, it is his essence to be pregnant with all things and to make them. As it is impossible for anything to be produced without a maker, so also it is impossible for this maker [not] to exist always unless he is always making everything.

CH VI 4. αἰ γὰρ ἔξοχαὶ τῶν καλῶν περὶ αὐτοῦ εἰσι τὴν οὐσίαν· φαίνονται καὶ καθαρώτεροι καὶ εἰλικρινέστεροι τάχα πού καὶ αὐταὶ αἰ οὔσαι ἐκείνου. τολμητέον γὰρ εἰπεῖν, ὡς Ἀσκληπιέ, ὅτι ἡ οὐσία τοῦ θεοῦ, εἴγε οὐσίαν ἔχει, τὸ καλὸν ἐστὶ, τὸ δὲ καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν ἐν οὐδενὶ ἔστι καταλαβέσθαι τῶν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ·

If indeed there are things preeminently beautiful near to god's essence, those seem perhaps even cleaner and purer in some degree which are part of him. One dares to say, Asclepius, that god's essence (if, in fact, he has an essence) is the beautiful but that the beautiful and the good are not to be detected in any of the things in the cosmos.

CH XII 1. Ὁ νοῦς, ὡς Τάτ, ἐξ αὐτῆς τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ οὐσίας ἐστὶν, εἴ γέ τις ἔστιν οὐσία θεοῦ· καὶ ποῖα τις οὔσα τυγχάνει, οὗτος μόνος ἀκριβῶς αὐτὸν οἶδεν. ὁ νοῦς οὖν οὐκ ἔστιν ἀποτετμημένος τῆς οὐσιότητος τοῦ θεοῦ, ἀλλ' ὥσπερ ἠπλωμένος καθάπερ τὸ τοῦ ἡλίου φῶς. οὗτος δὲ ὁ νοῦς ἐν μὲν ἀνθρώποις θεός ἐστι· διὸ καὶ τινες τῶν ἀνθρώπων θεοὶ εἰσι, καὶ ἡ αὐτῶν ἀνθρωπότης ἐγγύς ἐστι τῆς θεότητος·

Mind, ο Tat, comes from the very essence of god – if in fact, god has any essence – and god alone knows exactly what that essence might be. Mind, than, has not been cut off from god's essentiality, it has expanded, as it were, like the light of the sun. In humans this mind is god, among humans, therefore, some are gods and their humanity is near to divinity.

From the texts just quoted it can be seen that the authors would like to avoid the idiom in question rather than using it. They unambiguously refer to the fact that in relation to god, the expression can be used only for lack of something better: employing the term is nearly a religious offence. I think that the point at issue is that the expression is used as an analogy; if the nature and energy of god is to be described with our own words it can only be done with the help of the pattern of how the cosmic gods do their duty. However this method cannot work correctly, as the expressions like εἰ δὲ τί με καὶ τολμηρότερον ἀναγκάζεις εἰπεῖν or εἴ γέ τις ἔστιν οὐσία θεοῦ show that there is limit to the use of the word οὐσία concerning god. With restraints like this – even if they seem to be a little complicated – the authors indicate that they do not use the correct words.

In the following I would like to show that to solve the problem the Platonic tradition must be investigated, where – to simplify the question – the main

principle appears not as something that *is*, or not a *being substance* but as the source of being. Thus the word which indicates being ie. οὐσία cannot be used pertaining it.² These problems will be elaborated on later in this essay, although, it can be stated that this opinion is generally accepted in later Platonism. It follows from this that in Platonic and Christian texts we can read terms such as ἀνούσιος or ὑπερούσιος concerning the main principle. These expressions can be interpreted as something that is without or above existence.³ From this point of view it can be understood why the authors of the Hermetic texts would like to avoid the term οὐσία θεοῦ. Therefore it can be concluded that the correct interpretation of the word οὐσία here is being (or existence), and consequently the meaning of the idiom οὐσία θεοῦ is the being of god. From this point of view it is understandable why it cannot be adopted for the first principle: it is not one of the existing beings but the source of the existence.

The question is the following: can these considerations lead us to solving the problem of how to interpret οὐσία θεοῦ or there is a special context needed in which it becomes possible to discover the true meaning of the expression. In the following parts of my essay I will attempt to answer these question based on the context of the Hermetic corpus and with the help of some texts that can help to explain the developments of the theology in the late antiquity.

First of all, let us consider how the word οὐσία can be interpreted in the present conditions.

² Plat. *Rep.* 509b9: καὶ τοῖς γινωσκομένοις τοίνυν μὴ μόνον τὸ γινώσκεισθαι φάναι ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ παρεῖναι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ εἶναι τε καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν ὑπ' ἐκείνου αὐτοῖς προσεῖναι, οὐκ οὐσίας ὄντος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἀλλ' ἔτι ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας πρεσβεία καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέχοντος. Cf. *G. Vlastos*, Degrees of Reality in Plato. In: *Platonic Studies*. Princeton 1973, 58-75. *J. Annas*, An Introduction to Plato's Republic. Oxford 1981, 242-272. *G. Santas*, The Form of the Good in Plato's Republic. In: *G. Fine* (ed.), Plato 1, Metaphysics and Epistemology. Oxford 1999, 247-274.

³ *B.A. Pearson*, The Tractate Marsanes (NHC X) and the Platonic Tradition. In: *U. Bianchi – M. Krause – J.M. Robinson and G. Widengren* (eds.), *Gnosis. Festschrift für Hans Jonas*. Göttingen 1978, 373-384. *R. Majercik*, The Existence-Life-Intellect Triad in Gnosticism and Neoplatonism. *CQ* 42 (1992) 475-488. *C.L. Hancock*, Negative Theology in Gnosticism and Neoplatonism. In: *R.T. Wallis – J. Bregman*, (eds), *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism. Papers Presented at the 6th International Conference of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, entitled International Conference on Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, held at University of Oklahoma, Mar. 18-21, 1984*. New York 1992, 167-186. *J.D. Turner*, Gnosticism and Platonism: The Platonizing Sethian Texts from Nag Hammadi in their Relation to Later Platonic Literature. *Ibid.* 425-460. *Idem*, The Gnostic Sethians and Middle-Platonism: Interpretations of the Timaeus and Parmenides. *VigChr* 60, 1 (2006) 9-64.

In his commentary, W. Scott adopts the Peripatetic and Stoic use of the term,⁴ and interprets it as *a concrete (material or quasi-material) substance*. According to this interpretation the Hermetic usage of the word has no novelty in it, it is a philosophical term deeply rooted in the Hellenistic philosophical schools. With regard to CH XII. he says that *the writer hesitates to attribute οὐσία to God, and therefore here prefers to use the abstract term*. However, he makes no attempt to resolve the problem why the author has doubts to use the term describing god.

In my view the interpretation in the Stoic sense in this case is not convincing. Although the idiom οὐσία θεοῦ can be found in connection with the Stoics, it still supports the thoughts of Scott only partially.

Diogenes Laertius says that according to Zeno and Chrysippus the οὐσία θεοῦ is the whole cosmos and the heavens.⁵ In this case the term indicates that the divine logos is regarded as an immanent power, that has effect over the whole cosmos.⁶ As it follows from the previous statement it can be understood that the Stoics attributed to god the material substantiality of the cosmic gods, but beside this the word signifies here also the immanent essence of god, the logos which pervades the whole universe. If we think that we can solve our problem if we suppose that our texts deal with the question of how the first principle can be immanent, not wholly transcendent in the universe, we can accept the Stoic usage. But this interpretation leaves out of consideration those parallel texts which show close verbal connections with the Hermetic texts just quoted above. Already Festugière, in one of his studies criticized Scott's thesis, and drew attention to the Platonic tradition reminding us of some relevant connections with other texts showing close resemblances to the theological structure that can be reconstructed from the Hermetic treatises.⁷

At this point the treatise concerning the gods and the universe by Sallustius and some chapters of Jamblich's *De mysteriis* must be taken into consideration. Some of the Gnostic treatises and the early Christian debates of Christology⁸

⁴ *Hermetica. The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus I-IV*. Ed. et trans. W. Scott. (vol. IV. ed. A.S. Ferguson), Oxford 1924-1936. II. 339.

⁵ SVF II. 1022; II. 1132. I used also the following edition: A.A. Long – D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Vol. 1. Translation of the Principal Sources, Vol. 2. Greek and Latin Texts with Notes and Bibliography. Cambridge 1987.

⁶ For a summary of Stoic theology see: K. Algra, *Stoic Theology*. In: B. Inwood (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*. Cambridge 2003, 153-178.

⁷ A.-J. Festugière: *Les dieux ousiarques de l'Asclépius*. In: *Hermétisme et mystique païenne*. Paris 1967, 121-137.

⁸ About the development of the philosophical term οὐσία see: Chr. Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford Scholarly Classics). Oxford 1986.

give an interesting contribution to the attempt of solving the problems in discussion. It does not mean however, that the Stoic term mentioned above has no relation to the Hermetic texts and that these have to be excluded from our interpretation because if we want to solve that problem of how the transcendent god or the first principle can be in ontological connection with the causes and elements of the cosmic order, there is a great value in examining the Stoic usage of οὐσία.⁹ In this manner using the Stoic term οὐσία θεοῦ has the benefit to emphasize the immanent order of the cosmic gods who have the connection with the first transcendent cause.

As it can be seen in the following this divine order is going to be examined with the help of some examples. But first of all it seems to be practical to present the meanings of οὐσία in late Antiquity. Christopher Stead made the list presented in his study about the divine substance:¹⁰

- A Existence
- B Category or status
- C Substance
- D Stuff or Material
- E Form
- F Definition
- G Truth.

It needs to be noted that Stead made this list examining the terms ὑπόστασις and οὐσία in early Christian context. However, his findings and conclusions cannot be neglected. I use his results as a point of departure. I hope I will show that in the context of the Hermetic texts the following meanings of οὐσία are important:

- A existence
- B the special category of substance
- C material substance in terms of divine immanence.

At this point none of the above listed three definitions can be regarded as exclusive meaning, especially because on one hand there might be some new aspects occurring during our investigations, and on the other hand it might be

⁹ Cf. *R. Todd*, Monism and Immanence. The Foundations of Stoic Physics. In: *J.M. Rist* (ed.), *The Stoics*. Berkeley 1978, 137-160. *M. Lapidge*, Stoic Cosmology. *Ibid.*, 161-185.

¹⁰ *Chr. Stead*, op. cit. (note 8.) 132.

found that not only one special meaning is standard in our context. First of all, it must be examined what kind of basis the parallel texts could give in understanding οὐσία θεοῦ.

b.) The Hermetic term οὐσιάρχης and some parallel texts

There is an interesting text in the Latin Asclepius¹¹ that sheds light on οὐσία θεοῦ in Hermetic treatises. It is where the cosmos is described as governed by the first intelligible principle with the help of the cosmic gods:

*Magna tibi pando et divina nudo mysteria, cuius rei initium facio exoptato favore caelesti. deorum genera multa sunt eorumque omnium pars intelligibilis, alia vero sensibilis. intelligibiles dicuntur non ideo, quod putentur non subiacere sensibus nostris; magis enim ipsos sentimus quam eos quos visibiles nuncupamus, sicuti disputatio perdocebit et tu, si intendas, poteris pervidere ... sunt ergo omnium specierum principes dii. hos consecuntur dii, quorum est princeps οὐσίας. hi sensibiles, utriusque originis consimiles suae, qui per sensibilem naturam conficiunt omnia, alter per alterum, unusquisque opus suum inluminans. caeli vel quicquid est, quod eo nomine comprehenditur, οὐσιάρχης est Iuppiter: per caelum enim Iuppiter omnibus praebet vitam. solis οὐσιάρχης lumen est: bonum enim luminis per orbem nobis solis infunditur. XXXVI, quorum vocabulum est Horoscopi, id est eodem loco semper defixorum siderum, horum οὐσιάρχης vel princeps est, quem Παντόμορφον vel omniformem vocant, qui diversis speciebus diversas formas facit. septem sphaerae quae vocantur habent οὐσιάρχας, id est sui principes, quam fortunam dicunt aut Είμαρμένην, quibus inmutantur omnia lege naturae stabilitateque firmissa, sempiterna agitatione varia. aër vero organum est vel machina omnium, per quam omnia fiunt.*¹²

I begin by disclosing great things to you and exposing divine mysteries. There are many kinds of gods, of one part is intelligible, the other sensible. Gods are not said to be intelligible because they are considered beyond the reach of our faculties; in fact, we are more conscious of these intelligible gods than of these we call visible, as you will be able to see from our discussion if you pay attention. The heads of all classes are gods, after whom come gods who have a head-<of>-ousia; these are the sensible gods, true to both their origins, who produce everything throughout sensible nature, one thing through another, each god illuminating his own work. The ousiarchēs of heaven (whatever one means by that word) is Jupiter, for Jupiter supplies life through heaven to all things. Light is the ousiarchēs of the sun, for the blessing of light pours down on us through the orb of the sun. The thirty-six (the term is ‘horoscopes’), the stars that are always fixed in the same place, have as their head or ousiarchēs that are called Pantomorphos or Omniform, who makes various forms within various classes. The so-called seven spheres have the ousiarchai or heads called Fortune and Heimarmenē, whereby all things change according to nature’s law and a steadfast stability that stirs in everlasting variation. Air is the instrument or mechanism of all the gods, that through which all things are made.

¹¹ S. Gersh, Theological Doctrines in the Latin Asclepius. In: R.T. Wallis – J. Bregman (eds), op. cit. (note 3) 129-166. V. Hunink, Apuleius and the Asclepius. VigChr 50, 3 (1996) 288-308.

¹² Asclepius Latinus 19.

The text just quoted gives a description of a cosmic structure that is supported by a divine hierarchy: every zone of the material structure is governed by a single cosmic god, while every single cosmic god is subordinate to an intelligible divine power. In this way the whole sensible cosmos (*mundus* in the Latin Asclepius) is subordinate to the rule of an intelligible god while the first intelligible cause can remain transcendent at the same time. How does this structure work according to our text? As it can be stated from the text quoted while the cosmic god governs the beings in the sensible world under his authority, his authority is also under the rule of a higher intelligible god for the sake of the cosmic harmony. This is the intelligible cause that rules with the help of an οὐσιάρχης and directs the cosmic god. All of this implicates that here the term οὐσία stands for the essence of a cosmic god, that manifests itself in the power they display in the zone of the cosmic order they have to take care of. The word οὐσιάρχης refers to this concept and with its usage the aspect of a cosmic god can be expressed. (Eg. the cosmic god Fortuna rules the zone of the seven planets.) Thus the structure of the cosmos is enriched with one more aspect; the powers that animate and operate in the cosmos appear in the theological structure and the cosmos becomes a living and dynamic entity.¹³ It is also evident that both the cosmic and the intelligible gods must be understood as part of one god, so the contemplation of the lower but sensible god leads us to the recognition of the intelligible god who is manifested first in more sensible forms.¹⁴ These are the intelligible gods that appear as οὐσιάρχης in the Asclepius. The idea that the intelligible god is one single god and the sensible god can be identified as Iuppiter himself can be seen from another text in the Asclepius. The following can be read:¹⁵ *Deus supra verticem summi caeli consistens ubique est omniaque circum inspicit...Dispensator qui est, inter caelum et terram obtinet locum, quem Iovem vocamus.*

How can the meaning of the word οὐσία explained in this context? As it has already been stated the word has an ontological aspect. In this case the interpretation of the term would be existence and so the οὐσιάρχης can be translated as *the one, who rules the existence* of a cosmic god. On the other hand all the cosmic gods have a definite function, so the οὐσία refers to that substantial essence that the cosmic god displays through his power, what is more, this cosmic power depends on the intelligible god. However the meaning “substance of the cosmic god” cannot be excluded either.

¹³ Cf. A. Thornton, *The Living Universe*. Leiden 1976.

¹⁴ S. Gersh, *Middle-Platonism and Neoplatonism: The Latin Tradition*. Notre Dame 1986, 378.

¹⁵ Asclepius Latinus 27.

The order of the intelligible and sensible gods can be described as shown in the next chart:

Sensible god	Parts of the sensible god (θεός αισθητός)	The οὐσιάρχης
Iuppiter	Caelum	Iuppiter
	Sol	Light
	Horoscope, The 36 The Decans	Pantomorphos
	The seven planets: Saturn Juppiter Mars Venus Mercury Luna	Fortuna (Είμαρμένη)
Iuppiter Plutonium ¹⁶ and Κόρη	Terra	

The organon of these (*organum*) is that pervades the universe

Aēr ¹⁷	(Secundus? – lacuna)
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Some relevant textual and linguistic parallels to this Hermetic structure can be found in other sources. In the followings two sources are going to be examined to present how the term οὐσία appears in the similar sense in other, non Hermetic treatises.

Sallustius the author of the tractat *Concerning the gods and the Universe*¹⁸ makes a distinction between two types of gods that leads to a theological structure similar to the one described in the Asclepius. When he speaks about the gods, he says:

¹⁶ Ascl. Lat. 27: *terrae vero et mari dominatur Iuppiter Plutonium et hic nutritor est animantium mortalium et fructiferarum.*

¹⁷ Usually considered to be a separate part of the sensible God (Cosmos). Cf. *Gersh*, op. cit. (note 11) 377.

¹⁸ I used *G. Rochefort's* edition: Sallustios: Des dieux et du monde. Paris 1960. See also: *A. D. Nock*, Sallustius Concerning the Gods and the Universe. Edited with Prolegomena and Translation. Cambridge 1926. I used the translation of *G. Murray*: On the Gods and the World. In: Five Stages of Greek Religion. London 1943², 200-225.

Τῶν δὲ θεῶν οἱ μὲν εἰσιν ἐγκόσμιοι, οἱ δὲ ὑπερκόσμοι. Ἐγκοσμίους δὲ λέγω αὐτοὺς τοὺς τὸν κόσμον ποιοῦντας θεούς. Τῶν δὲ ὑπερκοσμίων οἱ μὲν οὐσίας ποιοῦσι θεῶν, οἱ δὲ νοῦν, οἱ δὲ ψυχάς.¹⁹

Of the Gods some are of the world, Cosmic, and some above the world, Hypercosmic. By the Cosmic I mean those who make the Cosmos. Of the Hypercosmic Gods some create Essence, some Mind, and some Soul.

In this text Sallustius makes a distinction between the cosmic and the hypercosmic gods. The former can be identified with the sensible gods, the later with the intelligibles. The material world is ruled by the cosmic gods that are submitted to the non-sensible, intelligible divine powers; to the hypercosmic gods. The cosmic gods rule the cosmos, however they themselves are submitted to higher non-perceptible although knowable divine activities, namely to the activities of the hypercosmic powers. These powers circumscribe the functioning of the cosmic powers and determine how they exert their powers in the cosmos. To clarifying the text I will illustrate the system of Sallustius in a table:

Hypercosmic gods ²⁰	Cosmic gods ²¹
τῶν δὲ ὑπερκοσμίων οἱ μὲν οὐσίας ποιοῦσι θεῶν	Τῶν δὲ ἐγκοσμίων οἱ μὲν εἶναι ποιοῦσι τὸν Κόσμον (Ζεὺς καὶ Ποσειδῶν καὶ Ἥφαιστος)
οἱ δὲ νοῦν (ποιοῦσι θεῶν)	οἱ δὲ αὐτὸν ψυχούσιν (Δημήτηρ καὶ Ἥρα καὶ Ἄρτεμις)
οἱ δὲ ψυχάς (ποιοῦσι θεῶν)	οἱ δὲ ἐκ διαφόρων ὄντα ἀρμόζουσιν (Ἀπόλλων καὶ Ἀφροδίτη καὶ Ἑρμῆς)
	οἱ δὲ ἡρμοσμένον φρουροῦσι (Ἑστία καὶ Ἀθηνᾶ καὶ Ἄρης)

The parallels between the Hermetic Asclepius and Sallustius' text must be emphasized. Both texts use the idiom οὐσία θεοῦ only regarding the cosmic gods and both texts refer to the fact that the οὐσία of the cosmic gods is dependent on the hypercosmic god(s). But the connection between the two separate types of gods is not explained in either text. Concerning the Asclepius some possible meanings for οὐσία have already been mentioned above. Having examined the text of Sallustius our departure point seems to be correctly chosen; however, no more conclusions can be drawn. Albeit, one chapter earlier describing the first cause Sallustius makes an interesting remark that may give a key to the problem. From this part of the text it can be concluded that the

¹⁹ *De diis et mundo*, VI.

²⁰ These are very similar to the Hermetic term οὐσιάρχης.

²¹ As every divine functioning can be separated into 3 parts there are 12 cosmic gods.

meaning of οὐσία is existence. It can be read that the first cause is more than οὐσία. If it was only οὐσία, the things that exist would only exist and not be good as well. However the existing things are also good. It means that they exist not because of the substantiality of the first cause, but owing to its goodness. Bearing all this in mind the first cause should be regarded as the good above existence.²²

The relation between the first principle and the cosmic god has a similar description in Jamblich's *De mysteriis*.²³ It is worth mentioning that the Hermetic literature is used as the source of his theological description. At the beginning of Chapter VIII he wonders why the Egyptians seem to have so many different first causes.²⁴ All of these problems can be found in the books attributed to Hermes that are said to sum up to twenty thousand books or thirty six thousand:

τὰς μὲν οὖν ὅλας Ἑρμοῦ ἐν ταῖς δισμυρίασι βίβλοις, ὡς Σέλευκος ἀπεγράφατο, ἢ ταῖς τρισμυρίασι τε καὶ ἑξακισχίλιαις καὶ πεντακοσίαις καὶ εἴκοσι πέντε, ὡς Μανεθῶς ἱστορεῖ, τελέως ἀνέδειξεν.²⁵

The whole gamut, however, has been covered by Hermes in the twenty thousand books, according to the account of Seleucus, or in the thirty-six thousand, five hundred and twenty-five, as Manetho reports.

At this point the significance of Jamblich's report is not to be examined, neither which kind of books he could have thought of or whether he could have read any of them or if he relies on secondary sources only.²⁶ However it must be emphasized that the Hermetic philosophy is clearly referred to and his description of the theological principles is similar in great extent to those discovered in the Hermetic texts discussed.

According to Jamblich the first principle that precedes everything is the first cause that rests motionless in its own unity. (Πρὸ τῶν ὄντως ὄντων καὶ τῶν ὄλων ἀρχῶν ἐστὶ θεὸς εἷς, πρῶτιστος καὶ τοῦ πρώτου θεοῦ καὶ βασιλέως, ἀκίνητος ἐν μονότητι τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ἐνότητος μένων.) This first god is the transcendent Good that is followed by a generative principle; the

²² *De diis et mundo*, V.3.

²³ E.C. Clarke – J.M. Dillon & J.P. Hershbell, Jamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, trans. with introduction and notes. Atlanta–Leiden 2003. See also: Jamblique: *Les mystères d'Égypte*. Texte établi et traduit par É. Des Places. Paris 1966.

²⁴ H.D. Saffrey, Relecture de Jamblique, *De Mysteriis*, VIII, chap. 1-5. In S. Gersh and C. Kannengiesser (eds.): *Platonism in Late Antiquity: Homage to Père Edouard des Places*. Notre Dame 1992, 157-171.

²⁵ *De mysteriis*, VIII. 1.

²⁶ About Jamblich and the Hermetic literature see: W. Scott, op. cit. (note 4.) IV. 28-102. G. Fowden: *The Egyptian Hermes. A Historical Approach to Late Paganism*. Cambridge 1986, 131-141.

cause of being. This latter is the source of existence and of the substantiality of gods but it precedes the existence. It means that it is the father of existence. (ἀρχὴ γὰρ οὗτος καὶ θεὸς θεῶν, μονὰς ἐκ τοῦ ἑνός, προούσιος· καὶ ἀρχὴ τῆς οὐσίας. Ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ γὰρ ἡ οὐσιότης καὶ ἡ οὐσία διὸ καὶ οὐσιοπάτωρ καλεῖται.) These are the first two causes that as Jamblich says according to Hermes are before everything preceding the aetherial, empyrial and celestial gods as well. During the description of these first principles Jamblich uses some interesting linguistic forms that are similar to the above mentioned Hermetic texts. He uses the idiom ἀρχὴ τῆς οὐσίας that shows close connection with the Hermetic οὐσιάρχης.²⁷ Similarly he employs terms such as οὐσιοπάτωρ and νοητάρχης. These words occur in the same contexts as in the case of the Hermetic texts, because the author shows with the help of these terms that the cosmic gods regarding their existence and even their substance depend on the first causes. It is not a coincidence. Jamblich’s aim is to show that the Egyptians made an effort to deduce the diversity within the world of the existing things from supposed intelligible principles in such manner that the indivisible unity and transcendentality of the principles remain intact. Thus from this first cause can the diversity of the material world be comprehensible. In this world the cosmic gods dependent on the first principle are the immanent causes of the powers manifested in the energies of the cosmos.²⁸ During the exposition of this structure the functions of the various ontological levels have their own function as well; all of the levels are dependent on the one preceding them, however, all of them have their own sphere of action and own purpose. It can be seen clearly from the description of the relationship between the cosmic and hypercosmic gods. Each of the divine powers has its own determined mode of action but their influence depends on the first causes that circumscribe their energy. Here the same structure can be detected as in the Hermetic texts or in the treatise of Sallustius; revealing the connections between the causes the intelligible principles and the ontological structure of the sensible cosmos is presented. In this structure the οὐσία of the cosmic gods has a special importance in the work of all three quoted authors.

This interpretation is also supported by another analysis of the Egyptian theology by Jamblich. In the third part of the eighth chapter he attributes another theological system to Hermes. According to this description there are also two precosmic principles; the first one is the indivisible One, the other is Kmeph, who rules over the celestial gods. Here it can be seen that the first prin-

²⁷ As far as I know the closest parallel can be found at Ps.-Dionysius Areopagites, who uses the word οὐσιαρχία once in *De divinis nominibus*. I do not know if Dionysius has the word in his mind from Hermetic sources or not.

²⁸ *De mysteriis*, VIII. 2.

ciples are in connection with celestial, cosmic gods which results in a cosmic order. This generative aspect is supported by the terms that Jamblich uses. The gods after the first principles are the leaders of creation (δημιουργίας ἡγεμόνες) and they reign over the world where things come into being. Among these gods there is also an ontological order according to Jamblich. After the first one who is the creating Intellect (δημιουργικὸς Νοῦς, who appears as Egyptian gods, eg. Amoun, Ptah, Osiris) various levels of cosmic gods follow down to the lower sublunar sphere. Jamblich referring to the Hermetic literature tries to show how the structure of the intelligible and sensible cosmos can be described by supposing a transcendent cause, in another words, how the transcendent principle becomes the utmost cause of the immanent gods and the energy they expound.

It can be concluded that the word οὐσία can mean existence as a key-term of an ontological system, or the substance of gods that can be interpreted as the essence or force of the cosmic gods. This meaning is likely if the Hermetic authors are considered who try to define the essence of god in a conceptual way. In the following part of the essay this second meaning is going to be elaborated on.²⁹

c.) The idiom οὐσία θεοῦ as the definition of the essence of God

When the Hermetic authors talk about the possibility of defining the οὐσία of God by all means they think of how the essence of God can be described. They not only want to name God but they want to expose and understand the essence of God in his functioning, in his forces. To solve the problem the Hermetic texts quoted at the beginning of this essay need to be examined again. Concerning the fifth treatise the essence of God – who in this context is the first principle – is the begetting and the creation; without God nothing could come into being.

What is more, in CH VI it can be read that the essence of God is Beauty and Good. In the case of the text of Sallustius this idea has already been revealed, namely that God is not only the source of the existence but also the source of

²⁹ The two meanings – existence and essence – is in a very close connection in Greek. After the analyses of Stead there are four basic usages of the word οὐσία. These are the followings (cf. Stead, op. cit. (note 8.) 132):

1. Verbal, noting the fact
2. Predicative
3. Subjectival
4. The same, considered individually.

Beauty in all existing things. What can be concluded here is that the word οὐσία describes God again as the source of the existence of created things. This definition may appear in many forms, but it still reminds us of the idea of the Platonic Good. The essence of God is Good and he is the final principle of the existence of all living. We can read the followings about it at the beginning of CH VI:³⁰

Τὸ ἀγαθόν, ὃ Ἀσκληπιέ, ἐν οὐδενί ἐστιν, εἰ μὴ ἐν μόνῳ τῷ θεῷ, μᾶλλον δὲ τὸ ἀγαθὸν αὐτὸς ἐστὶν ὁ θεὸς αἰεὶ· εἰ δὲ οὕτως, οὐσίαν εἶναι δεῖ πάσης κινήσεως καὶ γενέσεως (ἔρημον δὲ οὐδέν ἐστιν αὐτῆς)

The good, Asclepius, is in nothing except in god alone, or rather god himself is always the good. If this is so, the good must be the substance of all motion and generation (for nothing is abandoned by it).

This kind of use of the term οὐσία in the Platonic tradition must be examined.³¹ Some fragments of Numenius of Apamea³² can show the direction where the solution of the problem must be sought.³³ In the 2nd fragment it can be read that the first principle is enthroned above everything else (ἐποχούμενον ἐπὶ τῇ οὐσίᾳ). What this statement exactly means can be found in another text by Numenius. Eusebius informs us of Numenius, where he says that the first principle, the Intellect (ὁ Νοῦς) is above the intelligible things, the existence (or essence as des Places interprets the term here) and the idea (ἔστι νοητὸν ἢ οὐσία καὶ ἢ ιδέα).³⁴ From this text the conclusion can be deduced that in the ontological system of Numenius the first principle, which he identified with the Good was followed by the intelligible sphere, the world of existence and idea, and the Demiurge, who creates the world of generations.³⁵ In relation to the aforesaid it is important for us that according to Eusebius Numenius defined Good as the principle of existence (οὐσιᾶς ἀρχή). This idiom recalls the Hermetic οὐσιάρχης and refers to the fact that the first principle is

³⁰ CH VI 1. cf. *Scott*, op. cit. (note 4.) IV. 372.

³¹ About the Platonic tradition and Hermetism regarding to the theological problems see: *A.-J. Festugière: La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste. IV: Le dieu inconnu et la gnose.* Paris 1954.

³² For the citations of Numenius I used the edition of *É. des Places: Numénius, Fragments. Texte établi et traduit par É. des Places.* Paris 1973. For an English translation with the edition of the fragments see: *K.S. Guthrie: Numenius of Apamea,* London, 1917.

³³ For Numenius see: *P. Merlan, Numenius.* In: *A.H. Armstrong (ed.): The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy.* Cambridge 1967, 96-106; *M. Frede, Numenius.* In: *W. Haase-H. Temporini (eds.), ANRW, II. 36. 2.* Berlin–New York 1987, 1034-1075.

³⁴ Frg. 16. See: *des Places*, 1973 (note 32), 57.

³⁵ For the theology of Numenius see: *M. Baltes, Numenius von Apamea und der platonische Timaios.* *VigChr* 29 (1975) 240-270. *J.D. Turner, Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition.* Québec–Paris 2001, 385-389.

above everything else even above existence. The term οὐσία must refer to existence here, because about the genesis is said to be the image of οὐσία³⁶. Since the genesis is a characteristic feature of the cosmos³⁷ the material world must come into existence after the model of substantial being. So can the image of the existence with the idea form the intelligible realm and is able to create the cosmos with the help of the Demiurge. At the same time, because the world of existence is dependent on the intelligible first cause a similar structure can be seen as before; the intelligible first principle (in the case of Numenius, the Good) supports the material world through the substantial existence, without getting immediate connection with the material world.

The text analyses show that the idiom οὐσία θεοῦ is a widely used term in the theological literature of late Antiquity. Our researches has arrived to the conclusion that the term οὐσία has the meaning of (a) existence but in a complicated, substantial sense, (b) it refers to the essence of the cosmic gods, that they can manifest with the help of their power. As we have seen all the quoted authors have the opinion, that the existence of the cosmic god is determined by a transcendent principle for which the term οὐσία cannot be applied. If it was used the transcendent principle would be supposed to be dependent. In spite of this in the Hermetic treatises arises the question if the first principle has an οὐσία. In all of these cases the authors have doubts about the answer but using an analogical language they talk about how the essence of the first cause can be described. As we have seen this is in connection with the fact that the first principle is the first cause of existence, the ultimate source to which everything can be traced back. This can be seen also from the language used by the authors; eg. the CH II unambiguously makes a distinction between the substantial existence and the essence of god.³⁸

However, this remark raises another question. Namely, whether the term οὐσιώδης that is usually used for the divine condition of the human soul or for the process of divinization can be derived from the meanings of οὐσία or rather it has a special meaning that has to be interpreted as divine.

First of all, if the word has nothing to do with the term οὐσία why is it used in certain cases instead of using the concept of divine? In my view it is more likely that there is a connection between the two terms. As the cosmic gods are connected by their οὐσία to the first principle, so is the chance given to a human being to become divine, in other words, to be similar to the cosmic gods, and hereby to be in touch with the first cause with the help of his divine part

³⁶ Ἀνάλογον δὲ τούτῳ μὲν ὁ δημιουργὸς θεός, ὡν αὐτοῦ μιμητής, τῇ δὲ οὐσίᾳ ἢ γένεσις.

³⁷ Frg. 3.

³⁸ CH II 5: ἐὰν μὲν οὖν ἦ θεῖον, οὐσιωδὲς ἐστίν. ἐὰν δὲ ἦ θεός, καὶ ἀνουσίαστον γίνεται.

that is called ούσιώδης.³⁹ The one who gets this condition will be similar to the gods, can separate himself from the material world, and has an immediate connection with the first principle. In CH IX there are two kinds of people mentioned: those who are bound to the material world and those who are the divine ones (ούσιώδης). The former are ruled over by the daemons, while the others with the help of God can think in the right way, ie. by striving to know god they can be similar to Him.⁴⁰

οὐ πᾶς δὲ ἄνθρωπος, ὡς προεῖπον, ἀπολαύει τῆς νοήσεως, ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν ὑλικός, ὁ δὲ οὐσιώδης· ὁ μὲν γὰρ μετὰ κακίας ὑλικός, ὡς ἔφη, ἀπὸ τῶν δαιμόνων τὸ σπέρμα τῆς νοήσεως ἴσχει, οἱ δὲ μετὰ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ οὐσιωδῶς ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ σφύζομενοι·

As I said before, not every person enjoys understanding. One will be material, another an essential person. As I mentioned, material people surrounded by vice get the seed of their understanding from the demons, but god saves those who in their essence are surrounded by good.

Here the question of the divine ούσιᾶ is bound up with the problem of how god is knowable and how can the human beings become divine. Examining the divine nature is accompanied with the urge to seek also the way to God. This means that here we are dealing with a special sense of ούσιᾶ θεοῦ. On the evidence of the texts dealt with it can be said that it is not likely that the Stoic term ούσιᾶ has an importance here, rather the interpretation originating from the Platonic tradition must be used that explains how the first transcendent principle can be in connection with the material world. This is not an immediate connection – because in that case the transcendentability of the first cause would come to an end – but it is realized by the cosmic gods. The hypercosmic first cause has an effect on the order of the cosmos through the ούσιᾶ of the cosmic gods so although it is independent from the material world that can still receive Him. The texts studied show similar structures using the same linguistic elements to describe this ontological system in order to show that although the final cause is unknowable the divine can be attained by knowing the cosmic gods in their existence and in their essence.

³⁹ Cf. Asclepius Latinus 10.

⁴⁰ CH IX 5.