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Eriugena's theory of language in the Periphyseon: Explorations in the neoplatonic tradition

By
Dermot Moran

Any consideration of medieval theories of language must begin by acknowledging the enormous complexity of linguistic and semiotic discussions in the philosophical and grammatical traditions of the West, traditions which, as yet, are inadequately mapped and documented. Unfortunately, nothing like a full history of the development of linguistic and semantic theories is available.[1] For the most part, academic discussion of medieval semantics and semiotics has tended to concentrate on the lively period from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, looking, in particular, at the work of the *Modistae*, of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. All these writers develop their semiotic theories on the basis of Aristotle's *De interpretatione*, enriched by other rediscovered Aristotelian texts (such as Aristotle's *Rhetoric*).[2] By contrast, apart from the writings of St. Augustine on language, which have attracted particular attention from philosophers, earlier medieval views of language are not well known or understood. In this paper, therefore, I would like to contribute to the understanding of early medieval theories of language, by focusing on the work of John Scottus Eriugena (ca. 800–ca. 877). In order to locate Eriugena's work in its proper context, I shall begin by sketching aspects of the discussion of language in the Latin tradition from Augustine to Anselm, but I shall then point to an equally rich but much less well known tradition concerning the nature of speech and language, that is, the Neoplatonic tradition, exemplified by the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius. As we shall see, this Neoplatonic tradition challenges much of what Latin writers took for granted about the nature of speech and signification. Whereas almost all Latin writers followed the Greeks in taking words to be signs which stood either for things (*pragmata*, *res*) or for the passions of the soul (*pathemata en te psyche*, *passiones animae*), the Neoplatonic tradition tends to question the underlying assumption that signs say anything significant about reality as it is in itself. Neoplatonic philosophy of language tends to see all signs as gaining their meaning in relation to other signs, rather than directly in relation to the things signified. In a sense, then, the Neoplatonic tradition is more comfortable with the Saussurian "play of signifiers" account of language, rather than

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1   See, for example, R.H. *Robins*, Ancient and Medieval Grammatical Theory in Europe (London: Kennikat Press, 1951); R.W. *Hunt*, The History of Grammar in the Middle Ages. Collected Papers, ed. G.L. *Bursill-Hall* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1980); S. *Ebbesen*, The Odyssey of Semantics from the Stoa to Buridan, in A. *Eschbach* and J. *Trabant*, History of Semiotics (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1983), p. 67–85.

2   See H. *Arens*, ed., Aristotle's Theory of Language and its Tradition: Texts from 500 to 1750 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1984).

the classical account whereby language mirrors or pictures the real. Whereas the Latin, Stoic-Augustinian account of language focuses on successful attempts to signify things (*res*), the Neoplatonic tradition emphasises the gap between saying and reality, it focuses on acts of negation rather than assertion, is *apophatic* rather than *kataphatic*.

In particular I shall focus on Eriugena's *Hauptwerk*, *Periphyseon*, a lengthy philosophical dialogue in five books, written somewhere between 860 and 867 which contains an account of the creation of the world and its ultimate subsumption back under the principles of nature.[3] Eriugena wrote the work following prolonged exposure to the radical *apophatic* and mystical teachings of Dionysius the Areopagite, whose writings he translated in the early 860s. As a result of this work of translation, undertaken at the behest of King Charles the Bald, Eriugena underwent a profound conversion from the Platonism of Augustine to the Platonism of Dionysius.[4]

Eriugena has no explicit treatise on language, but the *Periphyseon* is, among other things, a treatise on the art of Dialectic, under which is subsumed the concept of signification in general. Furthermore, as we shall see, the *Leitmotif* of utterance (*vocare*), of speaking of the word, of crying out loud (*clamare*), with all the attendant psychological, epistemological and theological resonances, is a recurrent element in the *Periphyseon*.[5] In so far as we are able to reconstruct them from scattered remarks, Eriugena holds wonderfully evocative and complex views of language, which display both a (somewhat confused) understanding of the Latin tradition and a definite intent to go beyond it. Eriugena combines the Dionysian emphasis on the transcendence of the symbol with the Augustinian view of the sacramentality of the whole world, to produce a view of the world where everything is intellectualised as both sign and symbol (*signum et symbolum*).[6] The mind, in grasping the world, is not encountering brute inanimate objects (*res*) which really are out there (a view of the

3 The full text of the *Periphyseon* is contained in J.-P. *Migne*, ed., PL 122 (Paris, 1853). A critical edition is underway. The first three books have appeared in this edition. See I.-P. *Sheldon-Williams*, Iohannis Scotti Eriugenae Periphyseon (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, Vol. 1, 1968, Vol. 2, 1972, Vol. 3, 1981). Volumes Four and Five are in preparation under the general editorship of Professors Edouard Jeauneau and John J. O'Meara. An English translation of the whole text has appeared as I.-P. *Sheldon Williams*, Eriugena. Periphyseon (Division of Nature), edited by John J. *O'Meara* (Montreal: Bellarmin, 1987). For a review of the literature on Eriugena, see Mary *Brennan*, A Guide to Eriugenian Studies. A Survey of Publications 1930–1987 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1989).

4 See J. *Koch*, Augustinischer und dionysischer Neuplatonismus und das Mittelalter, Kant-Studien 48 (1956-7), p. 117–33 and J. *Pépin*, Univers dionysien et univers augustinien, Recherches de Philosophie (Aspects de la dialectique) 2 (1956), p. 179–224.

5 There has been little written about Eriugena's approach to language. The most significant articles are still Werner *Beierwaltes*, Sprache und Sache: Reflexionen zu Eriugenas Einschätzung von Leistung und Funktion der Sprache, Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung, Band 38 Heft 4 (Nov–Dec 1984), p. 523–543; also Donald F. *Duclow*, Nature as Speech and Book in John Scottus Eriugena, *Mediaevalia* 3 (1977), p. 131–40.

6 See W. *Beierwaltes*, *Negati Affirmatio*. Welt als Metapher, in R. *Roques*, ed., Jean Scot Erigène et l'histoire de la philosophie (Paris: CNRS, 1977).

world which is dismissed as merely sensual or *carnalis*) but is entering into a play of intellectual signs and significances, a rich symbolic tapestry which presents itself to the mind first as a confusing maze of appearances, *phantasiai*, and then as a kind of "mandala" of the divine, where all is transformed into divine manifestations, *theophaniai*. Furthermore, Eriugena's concept of language is imbued with the hierarchical structuring of reality common to Neoplatonism. All the world is a series of complex resonances of the one word (*verbum*) spoken in God by God. The highest word is silent, hidden and unspoken, and there is a descent through manifest words (*verbum interius, sermo, vox articulata*) right down to the domain of shadows, echoes and mere semblances which make up the temporal world of appearance and delusion.

The medieval starting point: St. Augustine

The writings of St. Augustine on language, as on other topics, provided the general framework of discussion for subsequent medieval philosophy[7]. It was Augustine who went beyond the Stoics and explicitly connected the theory of signs with the theory of language.

Largely as a result of Wittgenstein's discussion in the *Philosophical Investigations*, contemporary philosophers have focused almost exclusively on St. Augustine's *Confessions* as the key source book for his views on language.[8] At the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein quotes from *Confessions* Book One, Chapter Eight, a passage in which Augustine speculates on how children acquire language. Augustine claims that he did not learn to speak in the manner in which he later learned to read from his teachers, but that he taught himself through the intelligence God gave him, and was able to express his own inner meanings by crying out loud. When others did not recognise what he was saying, he had to dig into his *memoria* and recall the sounds people made when they were dealing with something. He knew what those sounds referred to because of a "universal language", which consists of gestures and facial expressions. Gradually then he heard words and knew their meanings and was able to express his own meanings by means of them.

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7 On Augustine's theory of language, see the entry, "Augustine," in T.A. *Sebeok*, ed., Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1986). See also W. *Beierwaltes*, Zu Augustins Metaphysik der Sprache, Augustinian Studies 2 (1971), p. 179–95. See also Christopher *Kirwan*, The Nature of Speech, in Augustine (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 35–59; R.A. *Markus*, St. Augustine on Signs, in St. Augustine. A Collection of Critical Essays (London: Macmillan, 1972) and T. *Todorov*, A propos de la conception augustinienne du signe, Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes 31 (1985), p. 209–14.

8 L. *Wittgenstein*, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G.E.M. *Anscombe* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976). See also L. *Wittgenstein*, The Blue and Brown Books, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), p. 77.

It was not my elders who showed me the words by some set system of instruction, in the way that they taught me to read not long afterwards; but, instead, I taught myself using the intelligence which you, my God, gave to me. For when I tried to express my meaning by crying out and making various sounds and movements, so that my wishes should be obeyed, I found that I could not convey all that I meant or make myself understood by everyone whom I wished to understand me. So my memory prompted me. I noticed that people would name some object and then turn towards whatever it was that they had named. I watched them and understood that the sound they made when they wanted to indicate that particular thing was the name which they gave to it, and their actions clearly showed what they meant, for there is a kind of universal language, consisting of expressions of the face and eyes, gestures and tones of voice, which can show whether a person means to ask for something and get it, or refuse it and have nothing to do with it. So by hearing words arranged in various phrases and constantly repeated, I gradually pieced together what they stood for, and when my tongue had mastered the pronunciation, I began to express my wishes by means of them.[9]

In this passage, as in passages of the *Confessions* which occur slightly earlier (e.g. I.6), Augustine treats his inner mental willings as completely formed and transparent to himself, needing only to be articulated in a form that would be intelligible to others.[10]

Wittgenstein takes Augustine's account as illustrative of a view of language which, though widespread, is fundamentally wrongheaded. An assumption exists that we must somehow already have a language in order to learn one, that is, that we already have a mental language (often called by philosophers "mentalese") and all we have to do is to associate the appropriate sounds with it. Wittgenstein comments:

> Augustine describes the learning of language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one.[11]

Language, for Wittgenstein, on the other hand, is a public, rule-governed practice, meanings emerge with use. I do not first have a private system of signifying things and then try to align my meanings with the public domain; the reverse is the case,

9   Saint Augustine, Confessions, translated by R.S. *Pine-Coffin* (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 29. Wittgenstein quotes a different translation of this passage, but there is nothing philosophical at stake in the differences in translation.

10   It is not an exaggeration to say that for Augustine, the will is the fundamental psychic drive which underlies all other mental acts. This emphasis on the voluntarist aspect of our mental life is developed by Descartes (directly under the influence of Augustine) and by Sartre in the 20th century.

11   *Wittgenstein*, Philosophical Investigations I.32.

only through the public practice of rule-following in language can anything like an inner understanding be possible, Wittgenstein claims.[12]

Wittgenstein identifies another feature of the Augustinian picture which he takes to be a general but incorrect assumption, namely, that learning a language primarily consists of learning the names of objects.[13] For Wittgenstein, language cannot be learned by the accumulation or repetition of acts of ostension where objects are the items designated. But there is no doubt that from Plato onwards, theories of language were largely theories of naming, and the main classes of names were nouns (pointing to things) and verbs (picking out actions),[14] with all other words considered ancillary and of problematic status; Aristotle, for example, calls them *syndesmoi*, conjunctions.[15]

Although Wittgenstein's discussion of Augustine does pick out central features of medieval theories of language in general, e.g., the priority of the universal mental language and the priority of the noun representing the thing as the paradigmatic instance of the linguistic sign, the actual passages from the *Confessions*, on which Wittgenstein focused, by no means exhaust everything Augustine has to say about language and signs. Augustine, a distinguished professor of rhetoric, returns again and again to the subject of language in a number of important works, from the early *De dialectica* (ca. 387) and *De magistro* (389), through the *De doctrina christiana* (composed over a long period between 396 and 426), to the *De Trinitate* (completed ca. 420). Indeed, Augustine's semiotic and hermeneutical explorations in *De doctrina christiana* were, arguably, much more influential on the Latin Middle Ages than the *Confessions*, while the latter work was more influential on writers of the Renaissance and of Modernity, on Petrarch or Rousseau, for example.

The background to St. Augustine's views on language is clearly Stoic, mediated through the work of Latin rhetors and grammarians, such as Varro, Cicero and Quintilian, (which in turn mediated views of Aristotle).[16] Augustine's *De dialectica* reproduces much of the Stoic theory of the origin of words, itself based probably on Varro's *Disciplinae*. Plato had already begun the analysis of language in the *Cratylus*

12   This is at least the conventional understanding of what Wittgenstein meant. A large literature has grown up on this subject. For some interesting reflections, see John *Haldane*, The Life of Signs, Review of Metaphysics Vol. 47 no. 3 (March 1994), p. 451–470.
13   Wittgenstein in the *Brown Book* gives examples of words which cannot be learned by pointing and are not things: 'today', 'not', 'but', 'perhaps'. Augustine discusses these kinds of words in *De magistro*.
14   *Cratylus* 386e. Aristotle in *De interpretatione* distinguishes between nouns and verbs in that nouns have no reference to time, whereas verbs have an inbuilt reference to time.
15   Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.5 and 3.12. Augustine in *De magistro*, treats all words as signs and then has difficulty saying what words like *nihil*, 'nothing', *ex*, 'out of', and *de*, 'from', stand for.
16   For a discussion of sign theory in Cicero and Quintilian, see G. *Manetti* and C. *Richardson*, Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity, p. 145–156. For an illuminating discussion of Stoic theories of language, see A. C. *Lloyd*, Grammar and Metaphysics in the Stoa, and A.A. *Long*, Language and Thought in Stoicism, in A.A. *Long*, ed., Problems in Stoicism (London: Athlone Press, 1971), p. 58–74 and 75–113 respectively.

where the debate centred largely on the question of whether language is natural or conventional. It was, however, Aristotle's compressed remarks on signs and language in a difficult passage of *De interpretatione* 16a which provided the basis for the later Greek and medieval discussion:

> Spoken words (*ta en te phone*) are symbols (*symbola*) of affections of the soul (*en te psyche pathemata*), and written words (*ta graphomena*) are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men do not have the same writing, so all men do not have the same speech sounds, but the affections of the soul – of which words are before all else signs (*semeia*) – are the same for everyone, as are also those things of which the passions are images.[17]

Aristotle employs two different Greek words in this passage – *symbolon* and *semeion*.[18] Recent commentators have argued convincingly that Aristotle's term *semeion* is best translated as a 'symptom' whereas *symbolon* is a sign in the proper sense.[19] The Stoics distinguished sharply between these terms: Natural or non-verbal signs or symptoms (*semeia*) are such things as the footprints of an animal, or the smoke which naturally signifies fire.[20] Speech, on the other hand, consists of signs or symbols (*symbola*) which are conventional and vary between peoples. Of course, speech is also a symptom of human behaviour. A cry of pain is a symptom of a certain *passio animae*. The Stoics were mainly concerned with natural signs, but Augustine manages to elide the distinction by translating both terms as *notum* or *signum*, as does Boethius in his translation of this very passage of *De interpretatione*. As a result there is some confusion in the Augustinian tradition between genuine linguistic signs and mere expressions such as the cry of pain. Augustine explicitly includes words in general under the category of signs. Augustine thus tends to bring together what Stoic theoreticians carefully kept apart, and merges the theory of signs with the theory of language.

For Aristotle, words stand as signs for certain passions in the soul, which are the same in all men. Augustine reproduces this view when he takes it to be the case that

17 Aristotle, *De interpretatione* 16a. I have adapted the translation of E. M. Edghill given in Richard *McKeon*, ed., The Basic Works of Aristotle (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 40, in the light of the remarks by U. *Eco, et al*, in On Animal Language in the Medieval Classification of Signs, in U. *Eco* and C. *Marmo*, ed., On the Medieval Theory of Signs (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1989), p. 5–6.

18 For an interpretation of the difference between these two terms, see N. *Kretzmann*, Aristotle on Spoken Words Significant by Convention, in J. *Corcoran*, ed., Ancient Logic and its Modern Interpretation (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1974).

19 See U. *Eco*, R. *Lambertini*, C. *Marmo* and A. *Tabarroni*, On Animal Language in the Medieval Classification of Signs, in E. *Eco* and C. *Marmo*, ed., On the Medieval Theory of Signs (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1989), p. 6.

20 See U. *Eco*, Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). Boethius in his *Commentary on the De interpretatione* offers the barking of the dog (*canis latratus*) as an example of a signifying noise (*vox significativa*) where the signifying is done *naturaliter* and not by convention (*ad placitum*). See Boethius, *In librum Aristotelis De interpretatione commentaria majora*, PL 64, 420c–d.

different languages simply produce different sound combinations to stand for the same, common mental states. In one sense, all classical writers from Aristotle to Augustine agree that humans have an inner system of concepts/passions of the soul which are the same for all men. Eriugena too will take it to be a fundamental task of speech to communicate and express what is hidden and unexpressed in the mind of the speaker (*vox* is the *interpres animae*). Speech is self-expression, the self-manifestation of the soul for Eriugena. As we shall see, he will treat this as a paradigm for self-creation (*se ipse manifestare*) and for both the divine procession of the Son from the Father, and the spatio-temporal manifestation of created things.

Augustine's sweeping identification of words with signs is followed by his claim that all signs stand for things. In the *De doctrina christiana*, I.2, Augustine defines words as signs of things as things (*res*).

> *Verbum est uniuscujusque rei signum.*
> A word is the sign of any kind of thing.

Here Augustine is repeating, more or less word for word, the definition of word which he articulates in *De dialectica*, ch. 5. A sign is that which points beyond itself to something else "something which is itself sensed and which indicates to the mind something beyond the sign itself".[21] The Stoics took all signs to stand for things, but took as their paradigm case of a thing something material which occupies space. Though Augustine does not depart from this primary instance of a thing, he also allows words to be signs which stand for incorporeal items such as other people's thoughts, or, indeed, words themselves, as in "cat has three letters" where the sign 'cat' here stands for the incorporeal *word* 'cat' and not the animal. In *De magistro*, the word *nihil*, 'nothing', does not point out nothing but rather stands for the speaker's mental state who is not thinking of anything. Words are signs in two ways: they stand for things and they represent the speaker's hidden inner intentions. Words stand as signs of the thoughts we want to communicate to someone else. See, for example the following passage from Augustine's *Encheridion de fidei* 22.7:

> And undoubtedly, words were instituted among men not so that men should deceive one another by means of them but so that anyone might bring his thoughts (*cogitationes*) to another's notice by means of them.[22]

Signs which signify beyond themselves are distinguished from things that do not. Of course, following the Stoics, Augustine recognises that signs themselves are sensible things. All signs are things, not all things are signs. Strictly speaking, for Augustine, things themselves rarely stand as signs for other things (wood, cattle or a stone do not stand for anything else). On occasion, Augustine concedes, having regard to the use of words in Scripture, things do signify beyond themselves, thus, in Holy Scripture, wood can stand for the Cross, and the stone which Jacob placed on his head can

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21   Augustine, *De dialectica*, ch. 5.
22   Christopher Kirwan, Augustine (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 45.

represent human nature. This concession that things can be signs will become a central feature of Dionysian and Eriugenian sign theory.

In the *De magistro* I.1 Augustine claims that in speech *(locutio)* we aim at nothing but to teach *(docere)* – language as conveying information – or to remember something *(commemorare)*, as when we give ourselves a sign of what is not present. Speaking consists of giving signs in articulate words and "by articulate I mean one that can be comprised of letters" *(De dialectica* 5.7).[23] What is transferred from one mind to another is a *significatio*.[24] Elsewhere Augustine talks of what is sayable, *dicibile*, as that which the sign communicates to the hearer. *Significatio* and the *dicibile* have the same meaning for Augustine, that is, the meaning communicated by a sign, as distinct from the thing referred to by the sign. *Dicibile*, the 'sayable', here is a direct translation of the Stoic notion of the *lekton*. The *lekton* is that which is expressed by our articulate sounds.[25] The model in *De dialectica* may be represented as:

$$vox\ articulata \rightarrow dicibile \rightarrow res$$
$$sound \rightarrow meaning \rightarrow thing$$
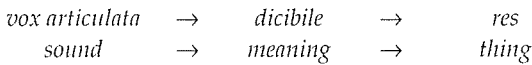
Augustine here is beginning to recognise the need to postulate a notion of objective meanings which are distinct from the things in the world. He does not progress further in this analysis, however, and shifts to a psychological and theological analysis of the understanding. Essentially, humans come to understand something not through the communication of meaning in signs, but through being merely reminded by the sign of the thing, which is actually presented in the mind through inner illumination by the mind by God. Signs then are secondary and derivative. The things themselves are illuminated to us by God.

With regard to Eriugena, the rich discussion of the inner word in Augustine's *De Trinitate* is more influential than the discussion of language acquisition in the *Confessions* or the theory of signs in *De magistro, De doctrina christiana* and *De dialectica* (although Eriugena was familiar with all these texts). In *De Trinitate*, there is a non-linguistic, inner word, which is not yet articulate thought, but is rather an inner intelligibility given by God, which makes thought possible. There is a mental act of understanding *(verbum mentis)* which precedes our inner silent speech (thought) and our external articulation of that thought in spoken language. Eriugena will adopt just this model in his discussion, presumably because it largely agrees with the concept of language found in the Greek Christian Neoplatonists, such as Dionysius.

Although Boethius is crucial for later medieval discussions of the relation of words to concepts, because, following Porphyry, he interprets Aristotle as meaning that

23 See *Kirwan*, Augustine, p. 35.
24 See *De quantitate animae* 32.66, discussed in C. *Kirwan*, Augustine, p. 40.
25 The Stoic *lekton* has a propositional content and is the bearer of truth or falsity. See Benson *Mates*, Stoic Logic (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953). The Stoics were materialists but had difficulty specifying the nature of the *lekton* which is really an intelligible meaning and hence is more like an abtraction than a corporeal thing. *Lekta* are incorporeal *(asomata)*, see Sextus Empiricus *Adversos Mathematicos* 8.11–12.

words are the signs of *concepts* (*intellectus*) not things; nevertheless we cannot develop Boethius' views here.[26] Briefly, Boethius's model can be displayed as follows:

signum	→	*intellectus*	→	*res*
sign	→	*meaning*	→	*thing*

It is hard to find a clear influence of this account on Eriugena, whose knowledge of Boethius appears to be rather patchy. Instead let us consider briefly how the dominant Augustinian account was re-interpreted by the Latin tradition after Eriugena.

The developing Latin tradition: St. Anselm

Later in the Latin Middle Ages, we encounter St. Anselm's account of the relation between a word and its meaning as developed in the *Proslogion* (ca. 1078) and in his reply to his critic, the monk, Gaunilo.[27] Anselm is meditating on the sentence from the Psalms where "the Fool hath said in his heart there is no God" (Ps 13:1; 52:1), a sentence Augustine had already used in support of his contention that thought is a kind of inner speech. Anselm shows that anyone who understands the meaning of the term or name of God "that than which nothing greater can be thought" must in fact recognise that the bearer of that name also exists. Now the problem is: if this is true, if the inner thought about God leads to the affirmation that God exists, how can the Fool meaningfully think or say in his heart that there is no God? To say the name of God and *mean* God by that name, is to recognise the existence of God. Anselm explains away this problem in *Proslogion* ch. 4 by making a distinction between the *vox significans*, the word signifying the thought of God, and *id ipsum quod res est*, the thing itself which is thought or signified by means of the word:

> *Aliter enim cogitatur res cum vox eam significans cogitatur, aliter cum id ipsum quod res est intelligitur.*

26   For a discussion of Boethius's interpretation of Porphyry and its impact on Abelard, see J. Marenbon, Early Medieval Philosophy (480–1150) (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 32–34 and p. 134–139. Abelard took words to be signs not of things, but of the relations between things.

27   Anselm had another account of words in the *Monologion*, chapter 10. When we speak of things (*res*) we can do so by means of sensible signs (*signa sensibiles*) or sounds which we articulate, or by these same signs (*eadem signa*) thought non-sensibly (*insensibiliter*) in us, or by grasping the thing itself (*res ipsa*) in thought, either through an imaginative image or through an intellectual understanding (*intellectus rationis*). See Jaspar Hopkins, A New, Interpretative Translation of St. Anselm's Monologion and Proslogion (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1986), p. 84–87. Anselm is allowing for the possibility that the mind can think the *res ipsa* in a purely intellectual manner and here he is following Augustine. Indeed, it is his belief that the *res ipsa* can be in the mind which is disputed by Gaunilo. In general, Anselm's account in the *Monologion* does not contradict that of the *Proslogion*.

> For in one sense a thing is thought when the word signifying it is thought, in another sense when the very object which the thing is is understood.[28]

Anselm is suggesting that if we really intend God and not the word then we must recognise that God exists. It is possible, however, to be fooled into thinking that the intentional object of our talk does not exist, if we concentrate on the meaning and not on the reference, on the *Sinn* and not on the *Bedeutung*, to use Frege's distinction. It is clear from Anselm's discussion here, that he recognises the difference between the signifying and the referential function of the sign. He is not clearly able to articulate it, as he remains within the simplistic *vox significativa/ res* system originally given by St. Augustine.

Anselm's critic, Gaunilo, in his *Pro insipiente*, his reply on behalf of the Fool, argued that, on the basis of Anselm's own argument, anything whatsoever which could be thought of could be said to exist, since it could be said to be understood.[29] Gaunilo considers the case where someone may be talking about a man that the hearer does not personally know. The hearer will understand what that person says, that is he will understand on the basis of the words used (*secundum vocem*) and indeed he will even be able to represent to himself or to think about a human being in general (*per illam specialem generalemve notitiam*). But he will not have in mind the particular individual that the speaker is talking about. Furthermore, perhaps that speaker is lying, and there exists no man to be talked about, then, when the hearer is thinking about the man the speaker is mentioning, he is thinking literally of something that does not exist, although, paradoxically, the hearer is indeed thinking of something genuine, i.e., human nature in general, and is not just representing a mere verbal formula to himself. Gaunilo here is employing a more sophisticated understanding of the relation between words and their meanings than Anselm has invoked. Whereas Anselm had a two fold distinction between the word and the sign, the *vox significans* and the *res significata*, Gaunilo, on the other hand, quite properly recognises a threefold relation: first we hear the articulated word (*vox*) which Gaunilo notes (following Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*) is itself a real thing, a *res*, made by the breath, and expressing the sound of the letters or syllables (*res, hoc est litterarum sonus vel syllabarum*), and then we have the *meaning* or *significance* of the heard word (*significatio vocis auditae*), and finally we have the external thing being thought about or referred to.

Anselm:	*vox*	→	*[imago]*[30]	*res*
Gaunilo:	*vox*	→	*significatio* →	*res*

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28   St. Anselm's *Proslogion*, trans. M.J. *Charlesworth* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 121.

29   *Charlesworth*, op. cit., p. 157.

30   As we saw above (note 27) Anselm believes we can think a thing directly in the mind either through an image or by a rational understanding which grasps the thing itself.

Modern semantics since Gottlob Frege, is closer to Gaunilo's analysis, by and large, than to Anselm. Frege distinguishes between the *Sinn* of an expression and its *Bedeutung*, translated variously as the distinction between 'sense' and 'reference', or 'connotation' and 'denotation'. We can refer to the planet Venus (the reference or *Bedeutung*) by using differing expressions e.g. 'the morning star' or 'the evening star'. These different expressions differ in their sense (*Sinn*) but both have the same reference. We need a distinction like this to call attention to the fact that the meaning of a phrase is different from the thing to which it refers.

Anselm (at least in these passages) appears as a direct realist, for whom every genuine signifying act must be successful, must be met by events or things in the world. The problem for Anselm is how to avoid the conclusion that all our signifying expressions correspond to things in the world. His solution is to distinguish between genuine and non-genuine modes of meaning. Gaunilo, by contrast, explains how we can think of something that does not exist in fact, by acknowledging that there is a meaning (*significatio*) which stands, as it were, *between* our word and the thing itself, and this meaning is part of the motion of our mind itself (*secundum animi motum*). Furthermore, this meaning is a universal and not an individual. The debate about universals in the twelfth century takes off from precisely this problem, though the text which initiates the discussion is from Boethius. In fact, in his *De grammatico*, Anselm shows a greater understanding of the difference between the meaning which the word intends and the object referred to, he distinguishes between what Umberto Eco terms the signifying and the referring functions of words.[31] In *De grammatico* Anselm distinguishes between *appellatio* (denotation, reference) and *significatio* (signifying, meaning, sense). For example, when I use the word 'grammarian' I mean to signify a quality ('knowing grammar') but I am also attributing this quality to someone designated. With this distinction we are moving closer to the theories of supposition which will be developed in great detail in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[32] In the thirteenth century St. Thomas Aquinas will make use of the distinction between the *modus significandi* and the *res significata* to argue that we can signify imperfectly, particularly where we are using referring expressions to pick out God. When we call God "Father" we are able to correctly refer to God, even though what we mean by father (the means by which we pick out God) only very imperfectly shadows what God really is. There is a gap which opens up between our signifying expressions and the reality they signify, but none the less, Aquinas remains confident that our language does succeed in referring to God. Unfortunately, we do not have time here to develop the complexity of medieval semantics. Instead, having drawn a

31   See Umberto *Eco*, Denotation, in U. *Eco* and C. *Marmo*, ed., On the Medieval Theory of Signs (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1989), p. 50–51.

32   See L. M. *DeRijk*, Logica Modernorum. A Contribution to the History of Early Terminist Logic, 2 vols (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1962–1967). See also J. *Pinborg*, Speculative Grammar, in N. *Kretzmann*, A. *Kenny*, J. *Pinborg* and E. *Stump*, ed., *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

picture about the manner in which the Stoic-Augustinian theory of language sets the framework for the discussion right up to Anselm, and indeed through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we must now turn to another strand in the western tradition of the discussion of language.

A complication in the picture: Pseudo-Dionysius

Medieval Latin concepts of language and signification were not formed exclusively on the basis of Augustine and the Latin grammarians. Of course, Eriugena's intellectual formation was Augustinian in the broadest sense, and his mastery of Augustinian texts is powerfully displayed in the *De praedestinatione* and elsewhere. Nevertheless, his real interest lay in the mystical teachings of Dionysius the Areopagite and in the Greek Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus, who gave him quite a different picture of the nature of God and the world.[33]

The Eastern Christian tradition which Eriugena admired was not at all as confident as Anselm and Aquinas that our language could attain to reality or express its real nature. Their paradigm was not so much of words standing as signs for things (the *vox-res* relation), as words possessing meanings which were not anchored tightly to objects in the world. Rather meanings are, as it were, independent building blocks which we can use to construct our world – a world which somehow comes to signify the divine source of everything, precisely because all the meanings remain signs, signs pointing beyond themselves, but whither they point is left open and uncertain. God resides precisely at the point where the signs point beyond themselves, God is the *other* of the sign. We do not have space here to develop Pseudo-Dionysius's account, we must merely note that Dionysius stresses and thematises the *failure* of language to achieve its goal. *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology* provide a detailed account of how speaking always takes place against a background of silence; comprehension is limited by non-comprehension. God is the *logos* above all *logoi*, he is the *logos arretos* (*De divinis nominibus* 1.1. 588b). God can be called all words precisely because he is nameless and all words fail equally. Signs now have the function of concealing instead of revealing. There is an ungraspable transcendent truth covered up and hidden by sensuous signs and symbols (DN, 592b–c). Dionysius refers to the mysteries, the symbolic level, the level where the mind must stop and something else take over if it is to penetrate into the divine darkness. Everything is a sign and, at the same time, no sign succeeds in pointing beyond itself to the thing. Rather it seems that the normal expectation of the "pointing beyond" of the sign is precisely what is both valued and negated. Dionysius rebukes those who are too caught up in understanding words through the senses (*dia tas aestheseis*, DN, 708d)

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33   For a fuller discussion of Eriugena's world-view, see D. *Moran*, The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena. A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

instead of transcending the senses and moving to the intellectual contemplation of things. All ordinary understanding of meaning is seen to be dependent on the senses, on seeing things *carnaliter* as Eriugena will say, whereas true understanding looks at things *spiritualiter*. In a sense, Dionysius dismisses all discussion of words, letters, sounds and speech as a preoccupation of the sensory level which must be surpassed in intellectual contemplation (*theoria*). Eriugena will take the same view, but he sees the sensory as being an emblem of the intelligible and is less dismissive of it.

Johannes Scottus Eriugena (ca. 800 – ca. 877)

Eriugena's concept of language has to be reconstructed from hints scattered through his writings. He began his career as a Liberal Arts *magister* and, like so many others, wrote a commentary on the standard liberal arts textbook of the time, the *Marriage of Philology and Mercury* of Martianus Capella. On Eriugena's account, the Liberal Arts included the three linguistic disciplines: Grammar, Rhetoric and Dialectic. Standardly, in medieval accounts, the three verbal arts, the *trivia*, were thought to deal with *verba* not *res*. But in *Periphyseon* Book Five, Eriugena brings the disciplines of Rhetoric and Grammar together as branches of Dialectic (*membra dialecticae*), and Dialectic is "the mother of all arts" (*mater artium*, V.870b). Furthermore, Dialectic deals with the nature of reality itself (*de rerum natura*, V.869d), with things (*res*). Grammar is a secondary and derivative science or art dealing with the laws of human speech (*de regulis humanae vocis*, V.869d) Eriugena agrees with the view of "Aristotle and his school" (*Aristoteles cum suis sectatoribus*, V.870a), that speech is conventional and not natural, and hence does not deal with things themselves. Furthermore Grammar and Rhetoric are less essential than Dialectic because it is possible for the rational soul to think within itself without recourse to articulate speech (V.870b–c) and hence be governed solely by Dialectic:

> *Potest enim rationabilis anima intra semetipsam de liberalibus disciplinis tractare, absque vocis articulatae disertaeque orationis strepitu.*
> For it is possible for the rational soul to treat within its very own self concerning the liberal disciplines, without recourse to the noise of the articulate word or clear speech.

Grammar (which is based on the letter) cannot be a basic part of the science of nature, whereas Dialectic is.

Human beings, Eriugena suggests, do not need spoken or articulated words in order to think. This passage alone only rules out using words spoken aloud but there are other passages where Eriugena makes it clear that the mind has an understanding of its own which is pre-verbal (agreeing with Augustine). The mind can use an inner word, the *verbum interius*. It can experience *contemplationes* or *theoriai* which reveal the meanings of things.

As with Augustine and Anselm, Eriugena approaches language primarily in terms

of the individual word, predominantly the spoken word, *vox*, but he also uses the terms *verbum* and *sermo* more or less interchangeably. In the *Commentary on John* he says *est igitur vox interpres animi* (*Comm.* I xxvii 72–74, 304b)[34], it is the word or voice which translates or expresses outwardly the mind (*animus*), it is John the Baptist who announces the coming of the Spirit of Christ. Eriugena comments:

> The voice is the interpreter of the Spirit. For, everything which the Spirit thinks and ordains within itself in an invisible manner (*invisibiliter*) is put forth in a sensible manner (*sensibiliter*) through the voice (*per vocem*) into the senses of the hearers.[35]

Things which are thought silently may be manifested in sound. This no doubt echoes the Aristotelian discussion of words in *De interpretatione* as the outward signs of inner passions of the soul (*passiones animae*).[36] At II.647a, in a meditation on which comes first, matter or form, the pupil in the dialogue, Alumnus, says he used to think unformed matter was first, just as sound comes before speech in the natural order of things (though not in the temporal order). Sound is a matter or vehicle for speech to inform.

Again, in line with the tradition, Eriugena gives priority to the spoken word over the written word. In *Periphyseon* III.706d he refers to the "articulated word" (*articulata vox*), repeating a term which had been current since Augustine to refer to the word as spoken out loud. Eriugena considers this to be the *manifest* essence of language itself. But Eriugena, following Dionysius, also emphasises the unsayable over the sayable, the unarticulated over the articulated, the intelligible over the sensible, the hidden over the manifest. The essence of language does not belong to its manifest aspect, the essence of language lies in its hidden interiority. As we shall see Eriugena is interested not in the outer name (*nomen*) but in the inner transcending name, *nomen super omne nomen*, translating a phrase he had found in Dionysius. All natural things have names, see for example I. 512a where he speaks of the *naturalium rerum nomina*, the names of natural things. Eriugena seems to regard names as conventional, nevertheless he regards the names or sounds (as in his etymologising) as especially and uniquely appropriate to the things they name. But Eriugena is more interested in those things which transcend limited nature (*natura creata et non creans*). He is seeking the *supernaturalis natura* which is nameless.

Eriugena seems to regard the ordinary relation between signs and their signified as unproblematic. He is much more interested in the difficulties posed by metaphorical or transferred meanings. Following Dionysius, Eriugena queries the possibility of terms applying to God literally (*proprie*). Clearly the sacred oracles (as he calls the

34   E. *Jeauneau*, ed., Jean Scot. Commentaire sur l'Evangile de Jean (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1972), p. 138.
35   *Jeauneau*, op cit., p. 138. My translation.
36   *Jeauneau*, p. 138 n. 13 also draws attention to Augustine, *Sermo* 288, *De voce et verbo* (PL 38, 1302–1308) and *Sermo* 289, 3 (PL 38, 1309).

scriptures) do use a great diversity of names to speak about God. There is indeed a whole branch of theology, *kataphatike*, which deals with affirmative utterances where God is called by different names. God can be said to have a face, hands, and so on. Such processes had been set down by Dionysius the Areopagite in his book, *The Divine Names*. On the other hand, *sensu stricto*, God has no name and is strictly speaking namelessness (*innominabilitas*, II. 510a).

> Thus He says "why do you ask my name for it is wonderful?" Or is not this name indeed wonderful, which is above every name (*nomen super omne nomen*), which is unnameable (*innominabilis*), which is set above (*supercollocatum*) every name that is named whether in this world or in the world to come (*in saecula … in futuro*). II.589c.

Elsewhere in Eriugena's text, God's Word is secret or hidden, *"verbum arcanum"* (II.510a), translating Dionysius's phrase *arretos*, "unutterable". The names of this world can be transferred to God by the processes of metaphor (*metaphorice, translative*) or carrying across. Scripture in speaking about God *translates* natural names to God (I.512a) but we must not be mislead by that. The true nature of the divine is unsayable, and we must learn to negate language in order to learn from it. Much more important, for Eriugena, than the Augustinian concept of language as the articulation of thought, is the notion of language as a veil screening the nature of the divine.

Eriugena has an account of the origin of language which connects it with the Fall. Language (as a collection of signs and symbols) may be understood to be part of those vestments which Adam and Eve were forced to put on to hide their nakedness. Language is a sensible cloak which conceals the purely intellectual nature of the divine. Yet also it is the set of signs and symbols we must use to attempt to point beyond this world towards the transcendent source of all things. From these diverse ideas Eriugena weaves a rich tapestry of ideas about the nature and role of language.

We should note that Eriugena is quite traditional in thinking of linguistic sounds as standing for the letters or syllables that make up words. A word is made up of letters. At *Periphyseon* III.706c-d Eriugena explains that words come together out of their letters, which the Greeks have wisely named *stoicheia* "because by their coming together the articulated word is perfected". The letters are the elements or words. Eriugena here is articulating a tradition that goes back to the Greeks. The Greeks (including Aristotle) distinguished those sounds which could be expressed by letters of the alphabet from those sounds which could not. Aristotle called those sounds that could not be represented by letters, *agrammatoi* and the Latins called these *voces illiteratae*. The caw of a crow (*vox corvina*) could be indicated with letters (Latin: *cra*) but the bellow of an ox could not be so represented. Aquinas repeats this distinction.[37] Just as the elements of air, fire, earth and water can both be contemplated singly and

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37 See U. *Eco*, R. *Lambertini*, C. *Marmo* and A. *Tabarroni*, On Animal Language, as above note 19, p. 10–11.

also in their coming together represent the compositions of all things, so letters can be understood on their own or brought together to represent everything. Eriugena is here recapitulating a basic Stoic theme. At II.606a Eriugena sees all complex physical entities as made out of the four elements so all names or words are made out of elements which are the letters.

Speaking about things in terms of the letters that make them up is speaking literally. To speak according to the letter, then, is to speak according to the very elements that make up reality itself. This is why Eriugena is at pains to stress that his account of nature is not meant allegorically (III.706c) when he explained that the scriptural word "light" signifies the visible and intelligible forms of things. Metaphor, paradoxically, is more true to reality than so called proper or literal speech.

Metaphor and synecdoche

Eriugena makes the relationship between words and things more complex, dynamic and dialectical than Augustine. The relation between words and things is actually reciprocal: words may stand for things and things too may stand for words. Words actually stand for or express things of the spirit rather than physical objects. Physical objects too stand for things of the spirit. It is always the spirit which is being symbolised either in words or in flesh or in matter. In a very interesting passage, Eriugena takes this reciprocity between words and things to be the meaning of the scriptural statement that the Word was made flesh and the flesh is also the word: *verbum dei vocatur caro et caro verbum* (III.706b) and, Eriugena goes on, "and there are similar cases in which there is understood both synecdoche and metaphor". Eriugena says that to say the word is flesh and vice-versa is to use both metaphor and synecdoche. Why does he say this? What does it mean?

In synecdoche the part comes to represent the whole ("all hands on deck") and in metaphor one word takes the place of another ("he was a lion in the fight"). Eriugena explains the meaning of synecdoche at IV.744c:

> This figure of speech, very common in the Scriptural writings, is called *synecdoche* or *conceptio*: for the concept of the whole is implied in the naming of the part, or that of the part in the naming of the whole. So the word soul by itself frequently in Scriptures signifies the whole animal.
> ...
> In the Gospel the word flesh signifies the whole man: "And the Word was made flesh" means that the Word was made a complete man, consisting of flesh , soul and mind.[38]

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38   I.-P. Sheldon-Williams, translation, in J. O'Meara, ed., Eriugena. Periphyseon (Division of Nature) (Montreal: Bellarmin, 1987), p. 384.

"The word is flesh" is clearly synecdoche. For "flesh" is really only a part of the human body and yet it stands for the whole of the human being, including flesh and non-flesh, i.e., spirit. However, Eriugena says that the statement is not just synecdoche but also metaphor, transference. To refer to Word as "flesh" is metaphorical because we are thinking of something that should be encapsulated in sound or the vibrations of the air, or made up of sounds which express syllables and letters, as actually embodied in physical living skin, bones and blood. Similarly it is equally metaphorical to say that flesh is word, to think of the physical as transmuted into meaning.

In saying that the word was made flesh is both synecdoche and metaphor, Eriugena is offering a very complex analysis of the relation of sign to thing signified, one which enriches the transitive relation between word and thing by making it into a reciprocal relation. Word stands for the thing, but the thing is also standing for the word, as Augustine had stated in *De doctrina christiana*. Each is standing for the other. Each can be put in place of the other (metaphor) but each also indicates only a part of the other, a part in which the whole must be understood (synecdoche). In one quick move, Eriugena both affirms and at the same time undermines traditional Christian concepts of the Incarnation of the divine. Incarnation means articulation. Flesh is flesh but flesh is also spirit. Spirit is spirit but spirit is also flesh. The whole man (body and spirit and not just body) is born of flesh , the whole man is born of the spirit and not just the soul of man (III.706b). Eriugena's whole philosophy is to overcome traditional Platonic dualisms between matter and spirit, or that division between things, words and their meanings. The two sides of wisdom are Nature and Scripture, but both are unified in that both are books to be read, that is both natural things and the words of Scripture are collections of signs which symbolise mysteries in themselves unutterable. One must never stop with the word or with the thing but one must always move beyond to the hidden, transcendent, unutterable *mysterium* behind words and things. There is no closure or finality in either the book of nature nor in Scripture.

The book of Scripture is infinitely subtle. The Holy Scripture is founded by an infinite creator (*infinitus conditor*, III.690b) and is constituted by infinite meanings or infinite interpretations of the meaning (*infiniti intellectus*, III.690b). No interpretation displaces (*aufert*) another. All interpretations stand as authentic perspectives on reality. For Eriugena we should never privilege any particular perspective, they are all equally near and all equally distant from God, they are like radii of the circle. There are in general however two main ways of interpreting things. We may interpret things either *carnaliter* or *spiritualiter*. In this there is both metaphor and synecdoche. To read *carnaliter* is to understand the exterior, the sensible, the temporal. This is indeed a part of the whole, but it is precisely part of the *spiritual* truth. To read the flesh as sign of the spirit is also to read *spiritualiter*. True wisdom is to have this *duplex theoria*. In a sense this is more accommodating to the sensory than Dionysius, who has little room for the sensory, natural order in his account of spiritual understanding.

The Word is central to Eriugena's metaphysics, but his account of the nature of the word is complex and hierarchical. Of course, the kernel of the meaning of the word is theological, but wedded to this theological concept is a hierarchical ordering of meanings of a Neoplatonic origin. At the very heart of infinite reality is the nameless God, or more accurately namelessness itself. The unnameable is the origin and source and centre of all, but in itself it is unthinkable and transcends all saying. The manifestation of the hierarchical structures of the visible reality is seen as the nameless God uttering a shout or *clamor* which timelessly produces or generates the Word (*verbum*). At Book II.580c, for example, God is said to have an intelligible or intellectual cry (*intelligibilis clamor*). A scriptural echo of this original cry is symbolised by John the Baptist who is a voice crying out in the desert (*vox clamante in deserti*). John the Baptist is the voice of the Word (*vox verbi*). Here a neat distinction is being drawn between the voice and the word, between that which announces and that which is announced in the announcing, between the *vox articulata* and the *verbum*. Eriugena recognises the full richness of these texts in connection with his theme of saying and announcing.

Eriugena's is a speaker theory of language. It might be represented as follows:

hidden intention	$\rightarrow$	*articulated word*	$\rightarrow$	*written word*
hidden intention	$\rightarrow$	*ideal form*	$\rightarrow$	*spatio-temporal appearance*

Even the goodness of God is thought in terms of the metaphor of speech. Eriugena gives the etymology of the Latin word for goodness (*bonitas*) as coming from the Greek, *buo*, which means "I cry out" (I.580c). At II.606c, he explains that the Greek word for goodness, *kalos*, comes from *kalo*, "I call out". It is the goodness of God that leads God to cry out in the act of creation. Here speech is understood both as a voluntary and a creative act. Indeed, in this passage, Eriugena notes a distinction between speaking and shouting, between *vocare* and *clamare*, but goes on to suggest that when speaking is done repeatedly and frequently it turns into a cry or *clamor* (II.580c). There is, therefore, a deep theological and conceptual link between the call of the divine goodness and the nature of things. Eriugena emphasises the divine freedom very strongly. Speaking is related to the will, as it was for Augustine.

God pours himself out by an ineffable condescension (*ineffabilis condescensio* III.678d). God creates himself "that is allows himself to appear in his theophanies" (III.689b). The speaking of the *verbum* is God manifesting his own hidden nature:

> God by manifesting himself, in a marvellous and ineffable way creates Himself in the creature, the invisible making himself visible and the incomprehensible comprehensible… (III.678c)

The Word expresses God, but, uniquely, because of the identity in God, the Word is not distinct from that towards which it points. The Word not only names God, but also is God. For this reason, Eriugena refers to the Word as *index*; God the Word is the

"model and art" (*ars et index*, III.651c) of the Father and only in this case are the paradigm according to which something is modelled and the art of modelling itself considered to be one.

It is through the divine speaking of the word that all things come to be made. There is a parallel between the creative, self-manifesting nature of God and that of human beings. Just as God manifests himself so we must manifest ourselves by speaking. God in fact makes or creates all other things be by speaking them:

> It is the prerogative of the divine nature to call forth (*vocare*) from non-existence into existence whatever it wishes to make. (*Periphyseon* II.580c)

Creation is speech (*vocare*). The moment of the self-expression of the Son from the Father is identical with the moment of the creation of all things:

> By the Father speaking his word, that is, by the Father creating his own wisdom, all things are made.
> *Patre loquente verbum suum, hoc est patre gignente sapientiam suam, omnia fiunt* (*Homilia* 287b)

The Word of God, the *verbum*, is identical with the *sermo* or speech of God which runs through all things (III.642d):

> By speech the prophet meant the Word of the Father which runs swiftly through all things in order that all things may be.
> *Sermonem dixit propheta verbum patris quod velociter currit per omnia ut omnia sint.*

Eriugena constantly oscillates between *verbum* and *sermo*. If a distinction is to be made, then *verbum* refers to the Second Person of God and the *sermo* to the act of God in creating all things. The *verbum* of God, however, produces an image of itself which is the human mind or intellect. Taking his cue from Augustine, Eriugena refers the notion of *verbum* not just to the divine nature but also to the hidden inner word in the human soul, the *verbum interius*, whereas in general he restricts the term *vox* to apply solely to human speech.[39]

Eriugena even thinks of the generation of the human body on an analogy with the mind's generation of sensible speech. The human mind by an action of its own manifests itself in the qualities and other accidents which make up the visible realm:

> For, by the action of the soul, which cements together the incorporeal qualities and takes from quantity as it were a kind of substrate and place it under them, it creates for itself a body in which she may openly display her hidden actions which in themselves are invisible, and bring them forth into sensible knowledge. II. 580b.

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39   See Werner *Beierwaltes*, Sprache und Sache, as above note 5, p. 524.

The body is a kind of sensible speech uttered by the mind, it is the manifest word spoken by the mind.

The purest word is always found in God and is God. Then there are intellectual words which are grasped by *nous* or intellect (*mens, intellectus, animus*) and which no corporeal clothing in the nature of sound or air or a vibration coming from the carnal mouth. These are unspoken words, which we might now consider to be thoughts or an intellectual understanding which has not yet been articulated in speech. Then there is the word which is clothed in the flesh of sound. The word is incarnated in speech. Eriugena talks about the way the intellect gives birth in itself to the knowledge of itself by which it knows itself (II.603a) Eriugena is here developing a notion of the birth of the Son (Word) in the soul which comes from St. Augustine and will later be a major feature in the theology of Meister Eckhart.[40] The idea is that in the human heart a manifestation or giving birth to the divine nature takes place. This is a kinds of second birth for the divine nature which has already been born in the flesh in the Incarnation. According to Eriugena the Word is always before the human mind (*ante oculos animae nostrae* V.865a) even in the blackest and darkest condition of sinfulness:

> the word never recedes from human consciousness
> (*verbum nunquam cordis nostri obtutibus recedat* V.865c).

The word is always present in our *memoria* (V.865c) recalling Augustine's view that it is in *memoria* that we first encounter God and of course the Platonic doctrine of anamnesis. There is then within the human being something which operates to illumine the mind. This is the Word itself but it serves to illuminate our own unspoken understanding. The human mind has a hidden *logos* or reason by which it knows all things in itself. It then is forced to express itself and bring these reasons into speech.

The metaphor of speech is sustained when, turning to created things, Eriugena says that they speak their own nothingness. Creatures call out *deus me fecit*, as Augustine says many times. So not only does the speaking of the word send a vibration through all things but also things themselves speak out of their own nothingness. Things considered in themselves are mere 'shadows' or as Eriugena says several times continuing the metaphor of speech, things in themselves are mere echoes of the voice, insubstantial in themselves, wholly dependent on a prototype. At V.914a Eriugena talks of the voice and its image "which the Greeks call *echo*":

> For all things which vary according to place and time, and which are subject to the corporeal senses, should not themselves be regarded as truly substantial existents but as transitory images and verifications derived therefrom. We may take as an illustration of this the voice and its image which the Greeks call *echo*; or bodies and the shadows which

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40   K. G. *Kertz*, Meister Eckhart's Teaching on the Birth of the Divine Word in the Soul, Traditio 15 (1959), p. 327–63.

they throw either in the pure air or in water or in any other medium capable of producing them. All such can be shown to be not themselves real, but false images of the real. So just as the echoes of voices and the shadows of bodies do not subsist of themselves because they are not substances; neither can sensible bodies, which are a kind of image of substantial things subsist of themselves. V. 914a.

With this reasoning, Eriugena advances the idealist thesis that human bodies and space and time are not real substances. The bodies that are resurrected will for the first time because true bodies – that is true spiritual substances. Earlier in Book IV.784a Eriugena had explained how the exterior sense is really a lesser luminary, a moon in contrast to the sun of inner sense. The exterior sense most often misleads us – as when an oar in water appears bent, the image in a mirror is reversed, towers which appear to a sailor in a moving boat to be moving and the counterfeit voice which the Greeks call 'echo'. Here illusions are understood as tricks of the voice, the metaphor of speech is continued.

Conclusion

For Eriugena the universe is ordered hierarchically from the *verbum* through the *vox* to the *echo*. The whole world is understood linguistically. The flesh is word and the word is also flesh. In the final return of all things, the image will return to oneness with its archetype, the echo will reunite with the voice that created it in the first place. *Echo* will be subsumed by *vox*; *vox* will be subsumed into *verbum*, the *clamor dei* will return to the inner word of God, and all things will go back into namelessness.

I hope, in this preliminary account of Eriugena's thoughts about language and speech, to have established how far his ideas move from the kinds of concern about signs that he found in Augustine and which we see later in Anselm. Eriugena adopts and develops a Neoplatonic approach to language. He operates with a much broader domain. While acknowledging the study of signs and sounds, in their sensory clothing they are *mere* sounds and signs. Eriugena is preoccupied with intellectual understanding, the inner words, symbols and sacraments, transcendent theophanies. Eriugena employs a very wide vocabulary: *vox, echo, signum, vocabulum, sermo, verbum, symbolum, sacramentum, mysterium* to provide a kind of hierarchy of insights into the all encompassing nature of speech and saying, saying always has a creative, ontological force; but non-saying, escaping from saying always uncovers the infinite richness of the divine darkness and silence.