

Re-Imagining Nature

Environmental Humanities and Ecossemiotics

Edited by
Alfred Kentigern Siewers



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To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,—
One clover, and a bee, And revery.
The revery alone will do
If bees are few.

—Emily Dickinson

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“The Secret Folds of Nature”

Eriugena’s Expansive Concept of Nature

Dermot Moran

Master: No philosopher of nature doubts that all things are contained in the divine mind.

Magister: Divino animo omnia contineri nullus recte naturas rerum intelligens dubitat.

—Eriugena, *Periphyseon*

In this chapter I want to address specifically the way in which *nature* emerges as a theme in the work of an early medieval Irish philosopher, Johannes Scottus Eriugena, also known through the efforts of nineteenth-century historians as “John the Scot.”¹ In his major dialogue *Periphyseon*, Eriugena attempts one of the most radical redefinitions—and indeed expansions—of the concept of nature (Greek: *physis*; Latin: *natura*) ever found within Christian philosophy, one that had a strong impact on later Christian mystical approaches (such as those found in Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa). First, he includes God within his original conception of “infinite nature,” something that would attract accusations of pantheism during the High Middle Ages. Secondly, he transforms the concept of created nature so that it has to be thought not just (as in traditional Augustinian Christianity) as entirely dependent on the divine Creator, but as *manifesting* the hidden nature of the transcendent Creator itself. Nature is to be understood as “the self-manifestation of God.” Everything in the created world has to be understood not just an appearance or image—a *phantasia*, in Eriugena’s vocabulary—but as at the same time a divine revelation or manifestation, *divina theophania*: “every visible and invisible creature can be called a theophany, that is a divine apparition” (3:681a, see also 1:446d).² Moreover, God unfolds Himself infinitely in divine theophanies; there are infinite divine manifestations. Nature, then, for Eriugena, is precisely this infinite unfolding of the divine

mind as its silent communication with itself (in the Word) is communicated externally to creatures.

In his *Periphyseon*, Eriugena offers a detailed cosmological account of how the infinite and unknown God, through a process of self-articulation or speaking the divine word, brings forth a procession of creatures, who themselves are mirrors of the deity and will ultimately return to their source in God. For Eriugena, finally, considering nature's spiritual source provides a contemplative means for entering into communion with the divine. Before I proceed to discuss Eriugena's complex conception of nature, I would like to review briefly the manner in which nature emerges as a theme in the classical and later the Christian philosophical tradition.

NATURE AS A THEME IN CLASSICAL THOUGHT

What indeed is more natural than the notion of "nature"? In one sense, as St. Augustine maintained about time, we all know what "nature" is: the natural world around us, mountains, seas, rivers, trees, vegetation, animals, and so on. However, we have to be careful not to impose our largely Romantic conception of nature (inherited from Wordsworth and others) on previous times. Nature has many different senses in antiquity. In Greek philosophy what is natural is usually opposed to what is artificial, what is produced by human hand; nature means that which somehow is encountered by humans without their doing and which exists independently of them. Nature is also opposed to "convention" (*nomos*), what is instituted by humans, for example, culture. There is also our "human nature" that determines or inclines us in various ways. There is a natural course of life from birth to death, and so on.

Etymologically, the English word "nature" comes from the Latin *natus*, the past participle of the verb, *nasci*, "to be born." Nature, accordingly, refers to the inherent character or disposition of a thing which it receives at birth or due to its birth. It can mean a controlling force in the universe, or even the external world (excluding human artifacts) in its entirety. It can refer even to the original state of humanity prior to the Fall, prior to culture, in the original, pristine "state of nature," and so on.

Ancient cultures (and not just Western) tended to be both very attentive to the workings of nature and also strongly *deterministic* about its fixed cycle and governing laws. There is a deep conviction that nature should be respected and that it cannot be altered without disaster. One cannot thwart nature, and nature does nothing in vain. Entities that belong to the natural order, for example, animals, have unalterable natures: Ancient Irish culture, for instance, to which Eriugena undoubtedly belonged, is quite pessimistic about changing natures, as is illustrated by the many "wise sayings" found in its oral tradition—*Ní feidir capall ráis a dhéanamh d'asal* [You cannot make a racehorse out of a donkey; or, colloquially, you cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear]. Or: *Briseann an dúchas trí shúile an chait* [Nature breaks forth from the eyes of a cat, or, more colloquially, a leopard cannot change its spots].

The ancient Greek conception of nature, *physis*, played a crucial role in the outbreak of philosophy and the development of scientific inquiry. Aristotle's *Physics*, for instance, understands nature as the inherent principle in things, that which makes them be the specific things they are. In Book Two of his *Physics* he writes:

Things "have a nature" which have a principle of this kind. . . . The term "according to nature" (*kata physin*) is applied to all these things and also to the attributes which belong to them in virtue of what they are, for instance the property of fire to be carried upwards—which is not a "nature" nor "has a nature" but is "by nature" or "according to nature."³

Nature, according to Aristotle, is an inner principle of change and being at rest.⁴ Aristotle's insight is things that have a nature have an internal principle, which makes them to be the kinds of things they are. This inner principle governs the kind of change, motion, growth, decay and alteration appropriate to them. For instance, it belongs to the nature of water that it can freeze or evaporate at a specific temperature. It is precisely because things have stable natures that they can be the subject of scientific knowing or *theoria*.

Some years after Aristotle, the Hellenist Stoics thought it possible to follow nature in some kind of deliberate way. Gisela Striker, in her study "Following Nature: A Study in Stoic Ethics," outlines what she calls Stoic ethical naturalism: "It was apparently taken for granted at the time [of the Stoics] that a good human life would have to be natural rather than unnatural in [the sense of living according to nature, *kata physin zen*]."⁵ In this sense, the Stoics continue the ancient conviction that whatever belongs to "nature" must be opposed to *nomos* ("custom," "habit," "convention," "culture" in general). Striker explicates the Stoic phrase "living in agreement with nature" as follows:

It does not mean, as one might first be inclined to think, "living naturally" as opposed to unnaturally, leading the kind of life that is natural for human beings. That contrast would be expressed in Stoic terminology by the phrase *kata physin zen* (living according to nature), as opposed to *para physin* (contrary to nature). It was apparently taken for granted at the time that a good human life would have to be natural rather than unnatural in this sense, so that the question about the goal of life could also be put more precisely as "What is the goal of a natural human life?"⁶

For Striker, living "naturally," in accordance with nature, struck all later Greek thinkers as perfectly commonsensical. Human life was focused on an end that was in some sense "natural" (*kata physin*), that is, that it had to express the nature of the species which was in question. Hellenistic philosophers, of course, offered different answers to the question of what is natural, depending primarily on their varying conceptions of the kind or nature in question. But, in general, the Stoics understood living in accordance with nature as a life lived in accordance with (or subject to) *reason*, since reason is what is essential to human nature.

THE CHRISTIAN APPROPRIATION OF THE GREEK MEANING OF NATURE

When the Alexandrine translators of the sacred Hebrew texts translated them into what we now know as the Septuagint, they sought to align central ideas in the Hebrew tradition with their equivalent Greek concepts. Early Christianity largely took over the conceptual distinctions of Greek philosophy, especially those of Platonism and Stoicism (albeit stripped of its materialism). A new opposition became prominent—that between *divine* and *created* nature.⁷ Here the Christians turned to the Platonists: divine nature is one, timeless, immutable, eternal, self-related and entirely self-contained, independent requiring nothing outside itself for its completion. Created nature, on the other hand, indicated a radical dependency. Thus St. Augustine could write in his *Confessions* that creatures cry out: “God has made me” (*deus me fecit*)⁸ and again in his *Exposition on Psalm 148*: “The heaven cries out to God, You made me, not I myself. Earth cries out, You created me, not I myself.” Moreover, as Augustine repeatedly emphasizes, the creature considered in itself is a mere “nothing” (*nihil*), since it is sheer dependency, in contrast with the overflowing, infinite plenitude of the independent divine being.

The legacy of Stoic thought with regard to acting in accordance with nature continues to echo in early Christian writings, notably in St. Paul. In Romans 11:16ff, for instance, Paul uses a metaphor of grafting olive trees, which may help to explain his use of the term *physis*: “For if God spared not the branches according to nature (*kata physin*), neither will he spare you” (Romans 11:21). And continuing, “For if you were cut out of the according-to-nature wild-olive-tree, and were grafted contrary to nature (*physis*) into the cultivated-olive-tree, how much more easily will these be grafted according to nature (*physis*) into their own olive-tree?” (Romans 11:21) Here God is shown, according to the usual English translations, acting “against nature” to bring Gentiles into the salvation prepared for Jews. “Against nature” here means whatever is contrary to God’s plan.⁹

During the Christian Patristic period, a new opposition came to inhabit the discussion of “nature,” namely the distinction between what is to be found in the “book of nature” and the “book of Scripture.”¹⁰ In the Early Middle Ages, it is sometimes claimed that the “book of Scripture” predominated, and this, combined with an overall Neoplatonic outlook, led to a devaluation of the consideration of nature in philosopher theologians such as St. Augustine. For instance, there is a famous passage in Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, where he is asked himself what he wishes to know. His answer is “God and the soul.” He then asks “nothing more.” He says “nothing more.” The dialogue reads:

A. Behold, I have prayed to God.

R. What, then, do you desire to know?

A. Those things for which I have prayed.

R. Sum them up, briefly.

A. I desire to know God and the soul.

R. And nothing more?

A. Nothing whatever.¹¹

Commentators have seen this exchange as emblematic of a kind of blindness to the created order of nature that served as a major impediment to the development of sciences of nature in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, it is somewhat unfair to portray Augustine as hostile to nature (although the theological nature/grace opposition also has a role to play in the devaluation of nature), because Augustine defends the study of the Liberal Arts with his parable of the “spoils of the Egyptians” in Book Two of his *De doctrina Christiana*. The Liberal Arts included not just the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, logic) which dealt with words (*verba*) and could be applied very usefully to interpret and analyze the Book of Scripture, but also the *quadrivium* (especially arithmetic and geometry) which could be applied to the study of the heavens and of the created cosmos generally. Furthermore, Augustine himself recommends study of both the books of nature and Scripture. For instance, in his *Exposition of Psalm 45* he writes:

It is the divine page that you must listen to; it is the book of the universe that you must observe. The pages of Scripture can only be read by those who know how to read and write, while everyone, even the illiterate, can read the book of the universe.¹²

This defense of the study of nature was a vital stimulant for medieval science. Consider, for instance, the fifteenth-century Cardinal Nicolas of Cusa’s (1401-1464) defense of the value of mathematics in the exploration of nature in his *On Learned Ignorance* (*De docta ignorantia*):

Did not Pythagoras, the first philosopher both in name and in fact, consider all investigation of truth to be by means of numbers? The Platonists and also our leading [thinkers] followed him to such an extent that our Augustine, and after him Boethius, affirmed that, assuredly, in the mind of the Creator number was the principal exemplar of the things to be created. How was Aristotle (who by refuting his predecessors wanted to appear as someone without parallel) able in the *Metaphysics* to teach us about the difference of species otherwise than by comparing the species to numbers? And when, regarding natural forms, he wanted to teach how the one form is in the other, he resorted of necessity to mathematical forms, saying: “Just as a triangle is in a quadrangle, so the lower [form] is in the higher [form].” I will not mention innumerable other similar examples of his. Also, when the Platonist Aurelius Augustine made an investigation regarding the quantity of the soul and its immortality, and regarding other very deep matters, he had recourse to mathematics as an aid. This pathway seemed to please our Boethius to such an extent that he repeatedly asserted that every true doctrine is contained in [the notions of] multitude and magnitude. And to speak more concisely, if you wish: was not the opinion of the Epicureans about atoms and the void—an opinion

which] denies God and is at variance with all truth—destroyed by the Pythagoreans and the Peripatetics only through mathematical demonstration? [I mean the demonstration] that the existence of indivisible and simple atoms—something which Epicurus took as his starting point—is not possible. Proceeding on this pathway of the ancients, I concur with them and say that since the pathway for approaching divine matters is opened to us only through symbols, we can make quite suitable use of mathematical signs because of their incorruptible certainty.¹³

With the rise of modern mathematical science in the seventeenth century, however, the concept of nature undergoes a massive transfiguration. Literally, nature was seen as really concealing figures, numbers. As Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) famously remarks: "The book of nature is written in numbers." In his *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina* (1615), Galileo writes:

In disputes about natural phenomena one must begin not with the authority of scriptural passages but with sensory experience and necessary demonstration, for the Holy Scripture and nature derive equally from the Godhead.

Experts of theology should not arrogate themselves the authority to issue decrees in the professions they neither exercise nor study. . . . Every authority which is not upheld by true reason is seen to be weak, whereas true reason is kept firm and immutable by her own powers and does not require to be confirmed by the assent of any authority. The Holy Scripture can never lie, as long as its true meaning is grasped; but [. . .] this is [. . .] frequently very different from what appears to be the literal meaning of the words.

Reason itself insists that we should understand the relation which exists between the sacred text and reality. I do not think [. . .] that the same God who has given us senses, language and intellect would want to set aside the use of these and give us by other means the information we can acquire with them. Who wants the human mind put to death? Who is going to claim that everything in the world which is observable and knowable has already been seen and discovered?¹⁴

Commenting on this passage, the Galileo expert, Alexandre Koyré, argues that for Galileo:

The book of nature is written in geometrical characters: The new Galilean physics is a geometry of motion, just as the physics of his true master, the *divus* Archimedes, was a geometry of rest. Geometry of motion, a priori, mathematical science of nature . . . how is that possible? The old Aristotelian objections against the mathematization of nature by Plato, have they, at last, been discovered and refuted? Not quite. There is indeed no quality in the realm of number, and therefore Galileo—and for the same reason Descartes—is obliged to renounce it, to renounce the variegated, qualitative world of sense-perception and common experience and substitute for it the colorless, abstract Archimedian world. And as for motion . . . there is, quite certainly, no motion in numbers. But motion—at least the motion of Archimedian bodies in the infinite homogeneous space of the new science—is governed by number. By the *leges et rationes numerorum*. Motion is subjected to number.¹⁵

In his *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations* Descartes provided the apparatus for handling philosophically this methodological decision of Galileo, we are to treat "blue" and "warm" not as clear and distinct ideas but in fact as ideas that are produced in us by our contact with the primary qualities in things. Things really are extended, but they are not really colored. The divorce between the external world and the human subjective world had been established for modernity. It is easy to see then how the concept of nature as the non-human world gets established.

The mathematical approach to nature of the exact sciences transformed (and perhaps even *deformed*) our contemporary understanding of "nature" as contemporary philosophers such as Husserl and Heidegger have shown. They see the need to rethink the traditional Greek understanding of nature and to revisit the manner in which we relate to nature as part of our experience of the "world of life" (*Lebenswelt*). What I want to do instead is to show how John Scottus Eriugena was to the fore in the reconceptualization of the concept of nature inherited from the Christian Platonism of Augustine and others. His dialectical conception of nature as including the relation between the divine and created, the timeless and the temporal, the uncreated and created, all of which is mediated by a human nature that straddles between these domains of finite and infinite, is already offering a new and enriched way of approaching nature that may very well offer a corrective to the Galilean approach that still dominates contemporary science.

NATURE IN JOHN SCOTTUS ERIUGENA

Johannes Scottus Eriugena (ca. 800–877) is unquestionably the most important philosopher writing in Latin between Boethius and Anselm, the most prominent figure of the Christian Dark Ages. Eriugena was committed to Christianity but equally committed to Neoplatonism. He understood the dynamic cosmic movement of the Neoplatonic descent from and return to the One as being identical to the Christian story of Creation-Fall-Redemption. He was, of course, heir to St. Augustine in this regard, although the late Augustine (e.g., in his *Retractions*) had put some theological distance between the doctrines of Christianity (on Incarnation, resurrection of the body, the reality of temporal history, and so on) and his earlier commitment to Neoplatonism, whereas Eriugena shows no such doctrinal concerns. Paganism is not an issue for Eriugena (although materialism is).¹⁶ His Neoplatonism was drawn almost exclusively from Christian sources, enriched by his contact with the Eastern Greek Christianity.

What singled Eriugena out at that time was his thorough, if imperfect, working knowledge of the Greek language, highly unusual in the West at that time. He also displayed a deep sympathy with the Greek mind (read here: the Greek Christian mind), and his translations of Dionysius and other Greek Christian authors, though flawed, nevertheless capture remarkably accurately the mystical spirit of the Greek theological tradition which, up to that time, was almost unknown in the Latin West.

Eriugena translated the *Corpus Dionysii*, the revered manuscript of which had been presented in 827 to the King of the Franks Louis the Pious by the Byzantine Emperor Michael the Stammerer. An earlier translation had been attempted by Hilduin, but Eriugena set to the task with gusto and established a literal translation that would still be in use four centuries later.¹⁷ Eriugena subsequently rendered into Latin Gregory of Nyssa's short but doctrinally important treatise *De Homini Opificio* (which he called *De imagine*), which specifically dwells on the issue of the nature of human beings in relation to the divine nature. Eriugena also translated Maximus Confessor's *Ambigua ad Iohannem*, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, and possibly other works.

Despite the importance of his Greek translations and commentaries, his fame as a philosopher is based on his major dialogue *Periphyseon* (written around 860-867 AD, also known, less accurately, but more traditionally, as *De divisione naturae*) wherein he produced a unique grand synthesis between the Neoplatonic traditions of the Greek Christian East (St. Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzus, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus Confessor) and the Latin Christian West (most notably Augustine and Ambrose, possibly some Boethius). The Christian Platonists conceived of God more or less in the manner in which Plotinus conceives of the One (developed from the concepts of the One in the hypotheses of Plato's dialogue *Parmenides*). This One is above being, beyond the good, beyond the realm of intellect or the intellectual light, dwelling in an inaccessible darkness, unknowable and unfathomable. This conception of God (as wholly transcendent) satisfied the Greek demand that God should be unsullied by the world, even to the extent of not knowing about it.

Eriugena was particularly impressed by Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchy*, where, in chapter 4, he read: "the being of all things is the Divinity above being" (1:443b).¹⁸ This is perhaps Eriugena's favorite phrase from Dionysius.¹⁹ Sometimes, instead of invoking the Dionysian formula *super esse divinitas*, Eriugena renders it as the "divine superessentiality" (*divina superessentialitas*, 3:634b), or—quoting Dionysius—the "superessential and hidden divinity" (*superessentialis et occulta divinitas*, 1:510b).²⁰

What does it mean to say that the being of all things is the One who is "beyond being" or "beyond essence" (*superessentialis*)? Eriugena comments on the meaning of *superessentialis*:

Nutritor; Did we not say that, strictly speaking, the ineffable nature (*ineffabilis natura*) can be signified by no verb, by no noun, and by no other audible sound, by no signified thing? And to this you agreed. For it is not properly but metaphorically (*Non enim proprie sed translatiue*) that it is called Essence, Truth, Wisdom and other names of this sort. Rather it is called superessential (*superessentialis*), more than truth, more than wisdom. But do not even these (names) seem to be, in a way, proper names (*propria nomina*)? For it is not called Essence properly, yet it is properly called superessential; similarly, if it is not called Truth or Wisdom properly, yet it is properly called more-than-truth and more-than-wisdom. For although among the Latins these names are not usually pronounced under a single accent (*sub uno accentu*) or by a unitary harmony of composition, except the name *superessentialis*, by the Greeks, on the other hand, each is expressed by a single compound. (1:460c-461a)²¹

God then is not essence but "above essence," *superessentialis*, or even the "essence above essence" (*superessentialis essentia*). At the centre of Eriugena's philosophy then is a conception of God as "beyond being," "beyond essence." He even goes further and understands God as "nothingness" (*nihilum*, *Periphyseon* 1981, 3:685a), and as the negation of essence (*negatio essentiae*, *Periphyseon* 1968, 1:462b):

For when it is said: "It is superessential," this can be understood by me as nothing other but a negation of essence (*Nam cum dicitur: Superessentialis est, nil aliud mihi datur intelligi quam negatio essentiae*, *Periphyseon* 1968, 1:462b).

God is "not this nor that nor anything" (*nec hoc nec illud nec ullum ille est*, *Periphyseon* 1968, 1:510c). We have to bear in mind this transcendent conception of the deity when we read Eriugena.

Following his exposure to Dionysius, Eriugena enthusiastically adopted the Areopagite's affirmative and negative theology, according to which denials concerning God are "more true," "better," "more apt," than affirmations. Eriugena maintains that affirmations are actually only the basis for negations; both are needed to express the transcendence of the divine nature (*Periphyseon* 1968, 1:461b-c). Eriugena will argue that all supposed affirmative terms, including such terms as "supernatural" and "superessential," are actually disguised negations. They are to be understood as underscoring the transcendence of the divine nature *above* all predication and all limitations. This dialectical exchange of negative and affirmative theology is crucial to the manner in which Eriugena articulates his conception of nature and needs to be borne in mind when reading Eriugena's statements.

THE DIALOGUE *PERIPHYSEON*—A TREATISE ON NATURE

Eriugena opens his great dialogue, *Periphyseon* (*De divisione naturae*, On the Division of Nature) by defining his area of investigation as *nature*, for which he, very deliberately, uses the Greek term *physis*. In his original cosmology, the first and highest principle is the "the immovable self-identical one" (*unum et idipsum immobile*, *Periphyseon* 1968, 1:476b), which engenders all things and retrieves them back into itself in a dynamic cosmic movement of outgoing (*exitus, proodos*) and return (*reditus, epistrophe*). In a significant departure from traditional Neoplatonism, Eriugena calls this first and highest divine cosmic principle "nature" (*natura*), which he defines as the "totality of all things" (*universitas rerum*), that are and are not (*ea quae sunt et ea quae non sunt*), which includes both God and creation (understood as the self-expression of God).

At the beginning of *Periphyseon* Book Four, Eriugena even labels his enterprise a "study of nature" (*physiologia*), and indeed one manuscript, now in the British Library in London, titles the whole dialogue *Liber Physiologiae Iohannis Scottigenae*. Eriugena, as cosmologist (*fiscus, sapiens mundi*) but also as philosopher (*philosophus*) and theologian (*theologus*), is conducting an "inquiry into nature" (*inquisitio*

naturarum, *Periphyseon* 1970, 2:608c), guided by “nature, the teacher herself” (*natura ipsa magistra*, *Periphyseon* 1970, 2:608d). The term *physiologia* is particularly apt because “nature” (*physis*) for Eriugena includes the whole cosmological domain, not just created nature but also the Divine Creator. In this grand theological and cosmological *system* God and nature are thought together. Nature is understood as the “general name for all things that are and all things that are not” (*Est igitur natura generale nomen, ut diximus, omnium quae sunt et quae non sunt*, *Periphyseon* 1968, 1:441a), including “both God and the creature” (*deus et creatura*, *Periphyseon* 1970, 2:524d).

Eriugena’s nature, then, has to be understood as the totality of all things that are and are not. By defining “nature” in this way, Eriugena extends late Neoplatonic thought (I mean by that Porphyry and Proclus and their students, among whom may be counted the anonymous Christian who wrote under the pseudonym “Dionysius”), which emphasized the nothingness or the “meontic” region *beyond* the One (because even to say “One” is too limited a way of naming the nameless First Principle) to express both the divine darkness and transcendence above being, and the literally incomprehensible and uncircumscribable infinity of the divine nature.

Nature is not simply transcendent nothingness beyond being. Through the sheer superabundance of its hidden depths, the divine nature eternally self-externalizes itself into a set of four “species” or “divisions” (*divisiones*) or “forms” (*formae*) which nevertheless retain their unity with their source by essentially being different manifestations of the same universal principle. These four divisions are:

- Nature which creates and is not created (God);
- Nature which creates and is created (the Primordial Causes);
- Nature which is created and does not create (the Created Temporal Effects); and
- Nature which is neither created nor creates (Non-Being).

Eriugena understands these four divisions of nature as articulating in a dynamic manner God’s nature as the Beginning, Middle and End of all things. The four divisions are necessary to express both the richness of the divine transcendence over and independence of creation, and also the divine immanence in the procession and return of created things, which flow out from God and depend on Him.

Of special significance in this divine and cosmic eternal process of outgoing (*exitus*) and return (*reditus*) is the central and ambiguous role of human nature. Human nature both facilitates and mediates the creation of all things, but also because of its own self-love, human nature is responsible for bringing about the world of mutable temporality and shadowy corporeality, which is the region of death.

Periphyseon Book One examines the first division of nature: God. According to Eriugena, here following Dionysius, God is not “literally” (*proprie*) understood as a substance or essence. He does not possess quantity, quality, or relations. God is not circumscribed by any of the Aristotelian categories. He is not in place and time, but transcends all, dwelling in inaccessible darkness. He is “beyond being” and may

even be described as “non being” or as “nothing,” a term which Eriugena thinks has biblical sanction. God’s nature is so transcendent and infinite that it escapes definition and circumscription. We do not know *what God is* (*quid est*). But similarly, even God does not know *what He is*, since He is infinite and uncircumscribable, and thus, remarkably, Eriugena concludes that God is unknowable even to Himself, His transcendent ignorance in this respect being a sign of His infinite richness rather than expressing a limitation on His nature. God knows only that He is (*quia est*), not what He is. (Note, by the way, how that formula gets appropriated for *Dasein* by Heidegger and human nature by Sartre in the twentieth century.)

For Eriugena, there is both darkness and light within the Godhead. The transcendent God is unknown and unknowable, but He can be known through his theophanies or divine manifestations. God radiates outwards from His transcendent darkness into the manifest light of creation. In this eternal outpouring, God at once eternally creates Himself and all other things. God’s self-creation is a form of self-manifestation (*Periphyseon* 1968, 1:455b), that is, God manifests Himself in an infinite series of revelations or theophanies (*theophania, hoc est dei apparitio*, *Periphyseon* 1968, 1:446d). This self-creation is understood by Eriugena as a self-expression, a speaking of the Word (*clamor dei*), which, at the same timeless moment in the process, brings about the creation of all other things, since, according to Scripture, all things are contained in the Word.

From the Greek Christian tradition, Eriugena inherited a very unusual theory of creation. Creation is to be understood as the self-manifestation of God, the process by which He makes His hidden nature manifest.²² As such it is a timeless event, inseparable from the Trinitarian procession from Father to Son. The whole of the created universe is to be understood as unfolding within the Trinity, at no stage is creation to be seen as an alienation or separation of things from God. If the Fall had not taken place, it is implied, all things including man would have evolved in their own mysterious manner in the bosom of God Himself. The “ineffable fecundity of the divine goodness” (*Periphyseon* 1971, 2:611b), in an “inexhaustible diffusion” (*inexhausta diffusio*) and “simple multiplication” (*simplex multiplicatio*, *Periphyseon* 1981, 3:632d), extends “from itself in itself to itself” (*a se ipsa in se ipsa ad se ipsam*, *Periphyseon* 1981, 3:632d). Creation then in one sense (traditionally understood as an act or attribute of God) is actually a fulfilling of the divine nature.

Thus in *Periphyseon* Book Three Eriugena repeats the notion that the divine nature *creates* itself:

The divine nature is seen to be created and to create—for it is created by itself in the primordial causes (*creatur enim a se ipsa in primordialibus causis*), and therefore creates itself (*ac per hoc se ipsum creat*), that is, allows itself to appear in its theophanies, willing to emerge from the most hidden recesses of its nature in which it is unknown even to itself, that is, it knows itself in nothing (*in nullo se cognoscit*) because it is infinite and supernatural and superessential and beyond everything that can and cannot be understood; but descending into the principles of things and, as it were, creating itself (*ac veluti se ipsam creans*), it begins to know itself in something. (*Periphyseon* 1981, 3:689a-b)

As Eriugena interprets this containment of all things in the Word (*verbum, logos*), the Word enfolds (to use a term from Cusanus) in itself the infinite number of Ideas or Primary Causes (*causae primordiales*) of all things. These Primary Causes are akin to Platonic forms or Stoic seminal reasons except that they are explicitly conceived as infinite in number and not rankable in any kind of hierarchy—Being is not prior to Goodness, or vice versa. Eriugena's understanding of these *causae* draws on Augustine's *De Genesi ad litteram*, Dionysius's discussion of the divine rays, and Maximus's notion of "divine willings" (*theia thelemata*), or divine ideas which function as the eternal causes of all created things. Each cause is a divine theophany and each is contained in God as the Word of God. These Primordial Causes may be contemplated either in their cause or source who is God, or in their created manifestations in this world, a point Eriugena took from Augustine in his *De Genesi ad litteram*.²³ *Periphyseon* Book Two discusses these Primary Causes located in the mind of the God, but, since they are causes, their very nature is to flow out from themselves, bringing about their Effects, and so Book Three looks at the created effects. Eriugena's notion of the *duplex theoria* or even what he calls *multiplex theoria*, required to understand the causes either in their divine source or in their created effects, is crucial for understanding his dialectical approach to the practice of philosophy.

This outflowing (*exitus*) of and from the divine nature creates the whole universe, from the highest genus (*summm genus*) to the lowest species (*infima species*), as Eriugena is fond of putting it. In this causal procession like produces like; incorporeal causes produce incorporeal effects. As a consequence, all created things are, in their essences as created being, incorporeal, immaterial, intellectual, and eternal. God creates out of Himself and all creation remains within Him. In Book Three especially Eriugena emphasises God's immanence in and transcendence above His creation. Because all things originate from God through His will, and because all things are sustained by God's power (and hence all things, in the Neoplatonic sense, "remain in" God), God and the creature can in a certain sense be said to be one and the same:

It follows that we ought not to understand God and the creature as two things distinct from one another, but as one and the same. For both the creature, by subsisting, is in God; and God, by manifesting himself, in a marvellous and ineffable manner creates himself in the creature. (*Periphyseon* 1981, 3:678c)

It was this phrase *unum et idipsum*, "one and the same," which got Eriugena into trouble as a pantheist. The problem is that this statement really has to be read in the whole context of Eriugena's dialectic.

In the first three books of the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena concentrates on the movement outwards, or *exitus*, which is precisely a movement from the infinite, unknown, hidden, transcendent, atemporal, purely spiritual into the finite, immanent, temporal, the material world:

For everything that is understood and sensed is nothing else but (*nihil aliud est*) the apparition of what is not apparent, the manifestation of the hidden, the affirmation of the

negated, the comprehension of the incomprehensible, the utterance of the unutterable, the access to the inaccessible, the understanding of the unintelligible, the body of the bodiless, the essence of the superessential, the form of the formless, the measure of the measureless, the number of the unnumbered, the weight of the weightless, the materialisation of the spiritual (*spiritualis incrassatio*), the visibility of the invisible, the place of the placeless, the time of the timeless, the definition of the infinite, the circumscription of the uncircumscribed. (3:633a-b)²⁴

Here nature as the appearing of what is concealed comes quite close to the Heideggerian interpretation of the meaning of *physis*. This is most certainly an expansive, indeed infinite, conception of nature.

THE HUMAN DIMENSION IN NATURE

Although this brief description of the cycle of infinite nature conveys the impression of a temporal sequence, Eriugena more properly conceives of the four "divisions" or "species" of nature as four "aspects" or ways of viewing the absolute unity of the One. In a number of publications I have suggested that the four divisions of nature are ways in which the human rational mind orders the manifest appearances of this world in relation to the One which, above time and space, is their origin. They are of course more than that. They are not only stages in the human contemplation of infinite nature; they are also ontological or cosmological stages in the great dialectical outgoing and return of nature itself.

Furthermore, all things are contained in the divine Word, and since human nature is made in the image of God, all things may be said to be contained in human being, which is the *officina omnium* (2:530d). In a sense then the whole universe is contained in human nature, and had human nature not fallen, all things would retain their purely incorporeal natures. The whole spatio-temporal world and our corporeal bodies, including the division into sexes, are a consequence of the Fall (*propter peccatum*, 4:896b), a "superaddition" (*superaddita*) onto the purely mental and immaterial. This physical world may be understood to be created by God anticipating that human beings would fall, or as a consequence of the human fall itself. Either way, this apparent corporeal world is not as substantial as it appears, but in fact depends on the interaction of human *nous* and *aesthesis*. Place and time are definitions, which locate things, and since definitions are in the mind, then place and time are in the mind (1:485b). The sensible, corporeal spatio-temporal appearance of things is produced by the qualities or "circumstances" of place, time, position, and so on, which surround the incorporeal essence. The reform of nature from its material to its incorporeal status then is dependent on the reform of human nature, a reform made possibly by Christ's *inhumanatio*.

Books Four and Five discuss the return (*reditus*) of all things to God, a return which centers around the absorption of all things into human nature and then the reintegration of human and divine nature. Corporeal things will return to their

incorporeal causes, the temporal to the eternal. The human mind will achieve reunification with the divine. Human nature will return to its Idea in the mind of God, and thus perfected human nature will become paradise. Humans who refuse to let go of the "circumstances" will remain trapped in their own phantasies, and this, rather than any place (*locus*), constitutes hell. The elect achieve a special deification (*theosis*) whereby they will merge with God completely, as lights blend into the one light.

HUMAN AND DIVINE NATURE

Just as God is infinite and unbounded, human nature is indefinable and incomprehensible and open to infinite possibility and perfectibility (5:919c). God's transcendence and immanence are reflected in human transcendence and immanence with regard to its world. Eriugena's dialectical thinking always stresses the close parallels between human and divine nature:

For just as God is both beyond all things and in all things—for He Who only truly is, is the essence of all things, and while He is whole in all things He does not cease to be whole beyond all things, whole in the world, whole around the world, whole in the sensible creature, whole in the intelligible creature, whole creating the universe, whole created in the universe, whole in the whole of the universe and whole in its parts, since He is both the whole and the part, just as He is neither the whole nor the part in the same way human nature in its own world (in its own subsistence) in its own universe and in its invisible and visible parts is whole in itself, and whole in its whole, and whole in its parts, and its parts are whole in themselves and whole in the whole. (*Periphyseon* 1995, 4:759a-b)

Eriugena concludes that human nature is "wholly in the wholeness of the whole created nature (*in universitate totius conditae naturae tota est*), seeing that in it every creature is fashioned, and in it all are linked together (*in ipsa copulata*), and into it all shall return, and through it must all be saved" (*Periphyseon* 1995, 4:760a).

Eriugena understands man as possessing a boundless freedom of choice, the perfect mirror of God's infinite and boundless freedom. In Greek, God's boundlessness is expressed by the term *anarchos*, which means without limit or without ruling principle. Eriugena frequently stresses that God is *anarchos*: *Deus autem anarchos, hoc est sine principio*, *Periphyseon*, 1:516a. He similarly characterizes human nature as not contrained by limit: "So the human replica of the Divine Essence is not bound by any fixed limit any more than the Divine Essence in Whose Image it is made" (*Periphyseon*, 1995, 4:772a).

And again:

For if human nature had not sinned but had adhered unchangeably to Him Who had created her, she would certainly have been omnipotent. For whatever in nature she wished to happen would necessarily happen, since she would wish for nothing else to

happen save that which she understood that her Creator wished to happen. (*Periphyseon*, 4:778b)

Eriugena found this doctrine of the potential omnipotence and omniscience of human nature in the Greek Christian Cappadocian writers, notably Gregory of Nyssa. In his *Periphyseon* Eriugena quotes long passages from Gregory of Nyssa's *De Hominis Opificio*, a work that explained the concept of human nature as made in God's image in terms of the complete identity between image and archetype. For Gregory and Scottus, an image is defined strongly as resembling its exemplar in *all* aspects. Image and archetype differ only in being numerically distinct. Thus Eriugena quotes Gregory:

For if God is the plenitude of good things, and man is an image of God, the image must resemble the Primal Exemplar in this respect also, that it is the plenitude of all good. . . . In this respect also it is the image, in that it is free from all necessity, and is subjected to no natural or material authority but possesses in itself a will which is capable of obtaining its desires. (*Periphyseon*, 1995, 4:796a-b)

How far this is from the usual humility of medieval statements about human nature! Human nature is asserted here as being free from all external authority and all necessity. As the image of God, he mirrors God's perfect freedom and power.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from this examination of some inherited meanings of nature in the Western tradition that Eriugena occupies a unique and important place. Eriugena greatly enriches the Christian conception of nature, and he employs Neoplatonism, often thought to be hostile to nature, precisely to show the dialectical complexity and yet inner unity of nature as a principle that enfolds in itself both infinity and finitude, timeless and temporal. Eriugena offers an attempt to overcome the Latin separation between nature and spirit. The closest figure in the modern period may be Spinoza, but it is certain that Eriugena's comprehensive account of nature needs to be revisited if we are to have a fuller understanding of our own relation to pluriform nature.

NOTES

1. Johannes Scottus Eriugena (ca. 800-877), who was born in Ireland and who came to prominence in the court of King Charles the Bald in France, is not to be confused with the medieval Scholastic philosopher John Duns Scotus (1266-1308) who was probably Scottish and who lectured at the universities of Oxford and Paris. See Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena: A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

2. The *Periphyseon* is cited here, and in following references in the text, according to the numbering system shared by these editions: John Scottus Eriugena, *Iohannis Scotti Eriugena Periphyseon: De Divisione Naturae*, ed. I. P. Sheldon-Williams (bk. 1, 1968; bk. 2, 1970); ed. by I. P. Sheldon-Williams and J. Bieler (bk. 3, 1981); and ed. J. J. O'Meara and I. P. Sheldon-Williams (bk. 4, 1995) all published (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies); and *Iohannis Scotti seu Eriugena Periphyseon, Liber quintus* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), (all hereafter cited as *Periphyseon*). I have also used the Latin text from Eriugena, *Periphyseon, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina* 122, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique 1841-1864), from which the shared numbering system originates. The complete English translation is by I. P. Sheldon-Williams and J. J. O'Meara, published in Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, ed. J. J. O'Meara (Montréal: Bellarmin, 1987), and based in part on some of the earlier volumes cited just above. The translation quoted in the text here is from Sheldon-Williams and Bieler, *Periphyseon*.

3. Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 236-37, 192b35ff.

4. *Ibid.*, 2.1, 192b20-23.

5. Gisela Striker, "Following Nature: A Study in Stoic Ethics," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 9 (1991): 5.

6. *Ibid.*, 4-5.

7. See *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought: Essays Presented to the Rev'd Dr. Robert D. Crouse. Studies in Intellectual History*, eds. Otten Hannam, Michael Walter, and Willemien Treschow (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2007).

8. See Moran, *Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena*, 214.

9. Biblical translations are my own, based on Greek versions of the New Testament. Similarly, in Romans 1:26, St. Paul speaks of homosexual acts as not being *kata physin*, according to nature, but rather "against nature" (*para physin*).

10. For a recent study see Jitse M. van der Meer and Scott Mandelbrote, eds., *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: Up to 1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

11. Augustine of Hippo, *Soliloquia, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina* 32, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique 1841), bk. 1, chap. 2, par. 7. My translation.

12. Augustine of Hippo, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 45, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina* 36, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique 1845), 7, 518.

13. See Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance. A Translation and Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia* (Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985), bk. 1, chap. 11, par. 32.

14. See Alexandre Koyré, "Galileo and the Scientific Revolution of the Seventeenth Century," *Philosophical Review* 52, no. 4 (July 1943): 333-48.

15. *Ibid.*

16. See my "Spiritualis Incrassatio: Eriugena's Intellectualist Immaterialism: Is It an Idealism?" in *Eriugena, Berkeley and the Idealist Tradition*, eds. Stephen Gersh and Dermot Moran (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 123-50.

17. See Dionysius the Areopagite, *A Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology at the University of Paris. The Mystical Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite in Eriugena's Latin Translation with the Scholia translated by Anastasius the Librarian and Excerpts from Eriugena's Periphyseon*, edited, trans. and intro. by L. Michael Harrington. Dallas Medieval Text and Translation Series (Paris: Peeters, 2004).

18. Sheldon-Williams, *Periphyseon*. Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Coelesti Hierarchia*, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca* 3, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1857), iv 1, 177d1-2. The Greek reads: *to gar einai panton estin he hyper to einai theotes*, which Eriugena translates as *Esse enim omnium est super esse divinitas*. See also Sheldon-Williams, *Periphyseon*, 1:516c; Sheldon-Williams, *Periphyseon*, 3:644b; and Jeaneau, *Periphyseon*, 5:903c; see also John Scottus [Eriugena], *Expositiones in Ierarchiam Coelestem*, ed. J. Barbet, CCCM 31 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1975).

19. Maximus Confessor also comments on Dionysius's phrase in 1 *Ambigua* xii, in Maximus, *Ambigua*, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca* 91, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1865), 1032-1417, at 1225d, a passage well known to Eriugena who translated the *Ambigua*.

20. Sheldon-Williams and Bieler, *Periphyseon*, and Sheldon-Williams, *Periphyseon*. The quote by Eriugena is taken from Dionysius the Areopagite, *De divinis nominibus*, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca* 3, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1857), at 1:1-2, 588b-c.

21. Sheldon-Williams, *Periphyseon*.

22. God's act of self-manifestation is at the same time the creation of all things. Sheldon-Williams, *Periphyseon*, 1:455b: "For when it is said that it creates itself the true meaning is nothing else but that it is establishing the natures of things. For the creation of itself, that is, the manifestation of itself in something, is surely that by which all things subsist?"

23. Augustine of Hippo, *De Genesi ad litteram, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina* 34, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique 1865), bk. 2, chap. 6, par. 12.

24. Sheldon-Williams and Bieler, *Periphyseon*. Nicholas of Cusa recognized the potency of this phrase *nihil aliud*, such that he uses it as the name of God Himself in his *De li non aliud*. See Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on God as Not-Other: A Translation and Appraisal of De Li Non Aliud*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Arthur Banning Press, 1983). Eriugena, on the other hand, is content with the name *Nihilum*, which he thinks is a common Scriptural designation for God.