

A Western Thinker of Nothingness: John Scottus Eriugena (c. 800-c.877 CE)

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Abstract

The early medieval Irish Christian philosopher John Scottus Eriugena is important both for translating into Latin the works of Greek mystical writers such as Dionysius the Areopagite and for his major treatise *Periphyseon* (*On the Division of Nature*, c. 867CE) in which he produced a cosmology which included both God and nature. Eriugena thinks of the divine nature as a “nothingness” that transcends all being and non-being. Creation is to be understood as the self-manifestation of this transcendent nothingness in the form of being. Eriugena thinks of the human mind too as a form of nothingness which escapes all limitation and definition. Eriugena’s work was hugely influential on later medieval mystics including Meister Eckhart. His work has been compared with Buddhism. I will explore in this paper whether this comparison is justified.

In this paper I want to speak to you about an obscure but influential philosopher from Ireland who had a strong influence in European Christian thought from the ninth to the twelfth century of the Common Era. Eriugena was writing at a time of renewal after the devastation of the Roman Empire by various invasions. During Eriugena’s life, the Vikings began to attack and destroy monasteries in Ireland and France. So Eriugena was writing at a time of great political and social upheaval. Nevertheless, his thought is a very optimistic expression of a kind of humanism that emphasizes the creative capacities of human beings.

At the exact time that Eriugena was writing his *Periphyseon* (*On the Division of Nature*), there was a different kind of philosophical renewal taking place in China. Buddhism had been growing steadily in China during the Tang dynasty. Emperor Wuzong (814-846) of the Tang Dynasty, who reigned from 841 to 846, sought to limit

the spread of Buddhism and other “foreign” religions (including Christianity and Zoroastrianism) and to re-establish Taoism and Confucianism. There was a persecution of Buddhism, monasteries were destroyed, and land and goods were seized by the Emperor. According to the annals more than 4000 monasteries were destroyed. Chinese Buddhism did not recover from this persecution for a very long time. So it would be very interesting to do a detailed comparison and contrast between philosophical developments in Europe and in China – in this same period, the ninth century of the Common Era.

In this paper, I want to outline some of the more “mystical” and indeed “Eastern” aspects of Eriugena’s thought. Eriugena can be seen as a very useful bridge between Eastern and Western thought. In order to show this, I will focus on the following themes: God as Transcendent Nothingness; Creation as Self-Manifestation of the Divine; The Human; Being as an Image of the Divine; The Possibility of Self-Transformation of the Human Being; Hell and Heaven are not real places but states of Mind; The Nature of Salvation or the Ultimate Re-unification of human and divine.

Johannes Scottus Eriugena (also known as “John the Scot” although he was really Irish) was a ninth-century Christian Neoplatonist, born in Ireland. He was probably educated in Ireland but he first appears in history as a philosopher and liberal arts teach at the court of the King of France in the Carolingian era.

We do not know when or where Eriugena was born. But some correspondence and also a name he himself used in his translation of Dionysius suggest that he was “Irish” (scottus) or “Irish-born” (Eriugena, Scottogena). He was active in the French court of Charlemagne’s grandson Charles the Bald in the Kingdom of West Francia (Northern France, part of Germany) from around 845 to around 877CE. We think therefore that he was born c. 790-800 CE and that he died some time around 880CE.

Charlemagne had declared himself Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in the year 800. When he died he divided his kingdom among his 3 sons who warred with each other. Charles the Bald inherited the Western Kingdom of Francia. The kingdom was unstable with many warring factions and the royal court had to move around between different palaces in Northern France. Eriugena was the Master of the Royal School and as such would have been an important court philosopher.

Since the time of Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Empire had embarked on a programme of education using the local churches and monasteries. Many of the educated monks came from Ireland, which had become Christian very early (already c. 460 CE) due to the missionary work of St Patrick. Ireland had remained outside the Roman Empire and hence its Christianity took on a particular Celtic character. There is definite evidence of a Celtic kind of Christian spirituality which is often compared with forms of spirituality found in the East.

The philosophical theology of John Scottus Eriugena is perhaps the highest theoretical expression of this Celtic spirituality. It is unique in the West for the emphasis it places on the “non-being” and in-finity of the divine One. Eriugena’s philosophy, however, was not appreciated by Church authorities and some of his ideas were condemned in his own lifetime. Several hundred years later his works were considered to embrace the heresy of pantheism, the identification of God with nature, and hence the denial of the transcendence and freedom of God.

Eriugena was a Christian, a philosopher and a theologian. He is also regarded as a mystic. We do not know if he was a monk but he was also a follower of the Christian Platonist tradition. This tradition had two sources –one Latin and one Greek. The chief Latin Christian Platonists were St. Augustine and St. Ambrose and Boethius. The chief Greek Christian Platonists were Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory

Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea and Dionysius the Areopagite. Eriugena is unusual for his time in seeking to combine the teachings of these two different forms of Christian Platonism. Eriugena could read and translate Greek which was highly unusual at this period and his own translations of Dionysius were influential for several hundred years in the Christian West.

Eriugena was – following the Neoplatonist tradition—a believer in a transcendent first principle which is the source of everything. He thought of this highest principle as the “divine One” and identified with the Christian Creator God. He also called this One “Nothingness” or “Non-Being” and this was most unusual – and followed the radical Greek Christian thinking of Dionysius the Areopagite. The central thought here is that God’s transcendence, uniqueness and infinite nature are so different from everything in the created universe of being, that God is better thought of as “non-being” or “nothingness” (Latin: *nihil, nihilum*). Eriugena’s theology centers on the notion of an infinite, incomprehensible, transcendent God--‘the immovable self-identical one’ (*unum et idipsum immobile, Periphyseon* I. 476b)--whose freely willed *theophanies* (Greek: “*theophaniai*”, divine manifestations) alone can be apprehended by created intellects such as angels and humans. The One, as highest principle, engenders all things timelessly, allows them to proceed into their genera and species in space and time and then retrieves them back into itself.

As a Christian Eriugena accepts the creation from nothingness of the entire universe. But he regarded all creation, all being, as having come forth not from some inferior nothingness (such as matter without form) but as coming from this divine nothingness. For Eriugena, the Christian conception of creation from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) had to be understood as creation from out of God (*creatio ex Deo*), understood as the infinite nothingness that transcends all things. Therefore *ex nihilo*

really means *ex deo*, out of God. There is no other source or principle of all things except the infinite transcendent One.

Eriugena's analysis of divine creation was also very much based on his understanding of Neoplatonism. In all Neoplatonists, the lower levels of the universe flow out from or emanate from the One and depend on the One and seek to return to it again (become one with the One). Eriugena therefore thought of the creation of all things as the emanation (*emanatio, exitus*) of the divine Goodness. All things are what they are as manifestations (*theophaniae*) of the divine. All things are "divine willings" (*diuinae uoluntates*) or divine appearances. There is no external principle needed. The One seeks to spread itself everywhere. It is an overflowing of goodness.

Eriugena thought that ultimately all things come together and are unified in the divine nothingness. However, he did not think of the infinite divine One as simply equal to nothingness. He has a sense of the divine as involved in a dialectic of self-affirmation and self-negation, manifestation and hiddenness. The divine One unfolds from nothingness into being, from divine darkness into light, from hiddenness to manifestation. There the divine One has to be understood not simply as nothingness or as being but as nothingness that manifests itself as being and that returns again to nothingness. Eriugena distinguishes many different kinds of nothingness. Things can be said not to be in many senses. Something that is in the future or the past, or is in some sense possible or potential, can be said not to be. But Eriugena also thinks that something that out of its infinite richness transcends all the categories of being (basically the Aristotelian categories: substance, accident, time, place, etc.) can also be said not to be. This is what he calls "nothingness through excellence" (*nihil per excellentiam*) rather than "nothingness through privation" (*nihil per privationem*).

All things, including human nature, are eternal ideas or causes in the mind of God. Humans fail to understand their true nature as image of God, because they are distracted by created, fleeting temporal appearances (*phantasiai*), which entrap the intellect in the clouded spatio-temporal realm of sense. However, through intellectual contemplation (*theoria, intellectus*) and divine illumination (which is the receiving of a divine self-manifestation, *theophania*), humans may achieve unification (*henosis*) with God, and the select few will even undergo deification (*deificatio, theosis*). Salvation, or return to the One, involves the corporeal body being resolved into its original incorporeal essence. Both heaven and hell are maintained to be states of mind not actual places (*loci*). Paradise is nothing other than perfect human nature. Eriugena often quotes Augustine to the effect that God became man (*inhumanatio*) so that humans can become God (*deificatio*). In this cosmological process, there is a dialectic of outgoing and return, of affirmation and negation, of non-being and being.

As we have seen, for Eriugena, God is the the immovable self-identical one' (*unum et idipsum immobile, Periphyseon* I. 476b). Furthermore, Eriugena thinks of the entire cosmic process as understood by the Greek term *physis* or the Latin term *Natura*, nature. Nature is the general term 'for all things that are and all things that are not' (*ea quae sunt et ea quae non sunt, Periphyseon, PL CXXII, I.441a*). For Eriugena, the hidden transcendent divine nature does not simply rest in its Oneness but divides or 'externalizes' itself into a set of four 'divisions' (*divisiones*), 'forms' or 'species', which make up distinct levels of the universe: God, the Primary Causes (or

creative ideas in the mind of God), the Effects of those causes (the created world of individual entities), and Non-Being.

The Four Divisions of Nature are:

- nature which creates and is not created
- nature which creates and is created
- nature which is created and does not create
- nature which is neither created nor creates

These four divisions of nature (adapted from similar divisions in Marius Victorinus and Augustine) taken together are to be understood as God, presented as the Beginning, Middle and End of all things. Nature is understood to be “infinite” and “multiplex”.

Eriugena thinks of God as really named in two of these divisions: the first and the fourth. God has to be understood both as the “essence of all things” (essential omnium) but also as “beyond” all things. Eriugena applies a dialectical language in order to express the nature of the divine as both hiddenness and manifestation.

Eriugena took this dialectic of affirmation and negation from Dionysius the Areopagite’s negative theology, according to which denials concerning God are ‘more true’ (*verior*), ‘better’ (*melior*), or ‘more apt’, than affirmations (e.g. “God is good”). He embraced Dionysius’ analysis of the divine names as found in his *Peri theiōn onomatōn* (*De divinis nominibus, On the Divine Names*). Certain Biblical appellations for the divine (such as: God is ‘King’, ‘Life’ ‘Goodness’) do not ‘literally’ (*proprie*) apply to God and must therefore be understood analogically or ‘through metaphor’ (*per metaforam, translativè*). Such terms are useful for the uninstructed. As St. Paul put it, to children we give milk but to adults we give solid food (1 Cor 3: 2). So, higher than these metaphorical statements about God are the names and descriptions

of the divine that involve negation. Negations are more appropriate to express the divine transcendence. God is therefore more properly said to be not being, not truth, not goodness, and so on. Following Dionysius' *Peri mystikēs theologiās* (*De mystica theologia*, *On Mystical Theology*), God is 'beyond being', 'more than being', 'neither one nor oneness', 'beyond assertion and denial' (PG III.1048a). Eriugena reproduces these formulations in Latin to express paradoxically the nameless transcendent divinity. For Eriugena, God is the absolute other. God is the "opposite of opposites" (*oppositio oppositorum*), the "negation of all things" (*negatio omnium*, *Periphyseon* III.686d). God is not 'literally' (*proprie*) substance, being or essence, nor describable in terms of quantity, quality, relation, place or time. He is "more-than-essential" (*superessentialis*", *Peri*. I.459d). His 'being' is 'beyond being', or, as Eriugena puts it, in his version of a Dionysian saying, God's being is the superbeing (of) divinity (*Esse enim omnium est super esse divinitas*), or, 'the being of all things is the Divinity above being' (*PP* I.443b). Sometimes, Eriugena speaks simply of the 'divine superessentiality' (*divina superessentialitas*, *Peri*. III.634b), or, quoting Dionysius' *Divine Names* I 1-2 (PG III 588b-c), of the 'superessential and hidden divinity' (*superessentialis et occulta divinitas*, *Peri*. I.510b). God may also be called 'nothingness' (*nihilum*), since His essence is unknown to all created beings, including all the ranks of angels (I.447c). Indeed, Eriugena argues, God's nature is unknown even to Himself, since He is the 'infinity of infinities' and hence beyond all comprehension and circumscription.

As a Christian, Eriugena accepts that the universe of all things (*universitas rerum*) was created by God. Furthermore Eriugena argues that creation "from nothing" does not mean creation from some kind of unformed matter but rather is creation which has only one source, namely God. Furthermore, Eriugena thinks that

we can say that God creates himself. God is both the first and the second division of nature. Eriugena writes:

...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* III.689a-b).

God creates Himself or Itself by moving from hiddenness to manifestation. Indeed, creation itself has to be understood as self-manifestation. Eriugena writes:

... creation, that is manifestation in another (*creatio, hoc est in aliquo manifestatio*, *Periphyseon* I.455b)

This leads to the inevitable conclusion that there is a strict identity between the creator and the created, between cause and effect. In other words God and creation are one and the same. Eriugena writes:

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* III.678c)

Furthermore, the created universe does not exist somehow apart from God. There is no “outside” God. Thus the creation in some sense must take place *within* God.

Eriugena argues that the creation is within God but in such a special way that it remains “other” than God:

... the Creative nature permits nothing outside itself because outside it nothing can be, yet everything which it has created and creates it contains within itself, but in such a way that it itself is other, because it is superessential, than what it creates within itself (*Periphyseon* III.675c).

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* IV.759a-b)

Eriugena has a very radical vision of human nature. According to Eriugena, human nature was intended to be the perfect “image and likeness” of God. Of course God gave human beings free will and this allowed for the possibility of turning away from God. Humanity’s original sin is to forget about God as the source of all things and to think that it is the source of all things. According to Eriugena, if man had not sinned he would not be ruled among the parts of the universe (*inter partes mundi*) but would himself rule the whole of it as his subject: and he would not employ for that purpose these corporeal senses of the mortal body, but would govern eternally and faultlessly the whole and the parts of it in accordance with the laws of God, without

any physical act in space or time, but solely by the rational apprehension of its natural and innate causes and by the easy use of right will (*solo rationabili contuitu naturalium et interiorum eius causarum* , *facillimo rectae voluntatis usu*, *Peri.* IV. 782b16-c24).

Human beings now live in a fallen and sinful state that has been brought about because they have turned their minds away from the divine manifestations and instead see them as material or earthly images. In fact, the Fall of human kind is precisely what gave human beings corporeal bodies. Before the Fall, human beings had incorporeal spiritual bodies. The first step of the return of all things then will be the reabsorption of body into spirit. Eriugena then thinks of heaven and hell not as physical places which human beings enter but rather as states of mind. It is because humans stubbornly refuse to let go of their fantasies that they can be said to be in hell. Similarly, when humans turn to accept the divine manifestations, they are in a heavenly state and “one with the One”.

According to the cosmic cycle Eriugena accepts, drawing heavily on Maximus Confessor and Maximus’ interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa, it is in the nature of things for effects to return to their causes. There is a general return of all things to God. Corporeal things will return to their incorporeal causes, the temporal to the eternal, the finite will be absorbed in the infinite. The human body will return to mind and mind will achieve reunification with the divine, and then the corporeal, temporal, material world will become essentially incorporeal, timeless and intellectual. Human nature will return to its ‘Idea’ or ‘*notio*’ in the mind of God. According to Eriugena’s interpretation of scripture, ‘paradise’ is the scriptural name for this perfect human nature in the mind of God. Humans who refuse to let go of the ‘circumstances’ remain trapped in their own phantasies, and it is to this mental state that the scriptural term

‘hell’ applies. Aside from the general return of all things to God, Eriugena claims there is a special return whereby the elect achieve ‘deification’ (*deificatio, theosis*) whereby they will merge with God completely, as lights blend into the one light, as voices blend in the choir, as a droplet of water merges with the stream. God shall be all in all (*omnia in omnibus*, V 935c).

Eriugena’s anthropology has recently been the focus of much philosophical interest. Eriugena adopts Gregory of Nyssa’s view that sexual difference is a result of the Fall, that the real Fall is the fall from intellect into sense, intellect distracted by the voluptuousness of sense. So, sexual difference really makes no difference for humans, or as Eriugena boldly puts it: “Man is better than sex” (*homo melior est quam sexus*, II. 534a). This, Eriugena believes, agrees with Scripture: “in Christ there is neither male nor female” (IV.795a). Thus, Eriugena’s radical Scriptural exegesis supports original philosophical claims about human nature.

Just as the transcendent nature of God allows us to legitimately apply contradictory predicates to Him (“*Deus est; deus not est*”), so too we may apply contradictory predicates to human nature. Eriugena employs dialectic to highlight the contradictions inherent in human nature: Man is an animal and man is not an animal; man is spiritual and not spiritual. For Eriugena, these contradictions are really indications of man’s exalted status. For Eriugena, “rational animal” does not adequately define human nature. Following Gregory of Nyssa, Eriugena also denies that human nature a ‘microcosm’ made up of all parts of the world. Humanity is a mirror of all things, the definition of humanity as “a certain intellectual concept formed eternally (*aeternaliter facta*) in the divine mind” (*Periphyseon* IV.768b) is one which applies to all other things too. Eriugena feels he has articulated the universality and comprehensive nature of humanity in this extra-ordinary definition.

Eriugena understands human nature as a *medium* between animal and angel, a mediator (*medietas*) between the earthly and the intelligible worlds. For Eriugena, human nature uniquely mirrors transcendent divine nature. Only of human nature can it be said that it is made in the image and likeness of God. Not even the angels are accorded that honor, so in a sense man is greater than the angels. Perfect human nature would have possessed the fullest knowledge of its Creator, of itself, and of everything else, had it not sinned (IV.778c). This mirroring of God in man occurs especially in the cognitive domain. God knows that He is but not what He is. God has existential knowledge but circumscribing knowledge of his essence, since, as infinite, He is “uncircumscribable”. The human too knows *that* he is, but he too cannot comprehend or circumscribe his essence or nature as that too is infinite in some sense.

Eriugena elaborates on the parallels between human and divine nature. Man would have ruled the whole of the universe as its subject (IV.782c). Man, like God, is the *plenitudo bonorum* (IV.796a) Just as God is infinite and unbounded, human nature is indefinable and incomprehensible and open to infinite possibility and perfectibility (V.919c). God’s transcendence and immanence are reflected in human transcendence and immanence with regard to its world. Consider the following remarkable passage from Book Four which is a typical example of Eriugena’s dialectical thinking and of the close parallelism between human and divine:

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* IV.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” (IV.760A).

I have outlined the philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena for a particular purpose. In my own academic development, I personally was very interested in this philosopher because he was the first Irish philosopher and I was interested as a young man in reconstructing the Irish intellectual heritage (see *The Irish Mind*). However, I also realize that Eriugena is regarded as one of the first French philosophers – since he taught in France. He wrote in Latin and he was able to translate Greek. Moreover he mediated between Greek and Latin forms of Christianity – symbolized by St. Augustine on the one hand and Dionysius Areopagita on the other. Eriugena went on to have a huge influence on Meister Eckhart. In Japan especially, Eckhart is studied as someone close to Japanese Zen Buddhism.

This kind of cross-cultural or inter-cultural figure can help us in our dialogue between cultures. Eriugena himself not only experienced the confluence of cultures – the native Irish culture written in the Gaelic language (annotations of Gaelic words survive among his authentic works), the Latin culture of Roman Catholicism and of

the Carolingian culture, but also the Greek Christian culture (Orthodox Christianity) which he experienced directly and which he translated into Latin. Indeed, Eriugena's translation of Dionysius was an important influence in the Latin West until the 13th Century CE. It is important to realize that large cultural traditions are not monolithic and are usually the product of many different and varied influences (e.g. Western European culture is a product not just of the Greek Enlightenment but also of Judaeo-Christian religious values. We can look at specific aspects of a tradition and these can be highlighted when we compare or contrast them with other traditions.

In the case of John Scottus Eriugena, although he was a committed Christian who believed both in an all powerful God who created the universe and who is present in the created universe through the Son who is both the principle and rationale (*logos, ratio*) of all things, Eriugena also thought of the divine first principle as an infinite kind of formless nothingness which transcends all things, including the concept of "person". If Eriugena were asked if he believed in a personal God, his answer would be to distinguish between affirmative and negative ways of talking but he would regard the negative descriptions of God as "non-being", "not-good" etc as more true and more apt and takes us beyond the metaphors based on the transference of predicates from the created universe.

To understand the Eriugenian conception of "nothingness" or non-being it is useful to have something to compare it with. Normally, the concept of "nothingness" found in Buddhism is invoked. According to TU Weiming, Confucianism as a tradition lacks the idea of radical transcendence. This is something that perhaps is better understood in Taoism and Buddhism. Eriugena has a conception of the divine as infinite – and as radically transcendent – to the point of best being understood as nothingness.