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Abstract

John (Johannes) (c. 800–c. 877 CE), referred to by his contemporaries as "the Irishman" (*Scottus*), and who signed himself "Eriugena," was an Irish-born Christian Neoplatonist philosopher and theologian of great originality. The most outstanding philosopher writing in Latin between Boethius and Anselm, Eriugena is best known as the author of *Periphyseon* (*De divisione naturae, On the Division of Nature*, c. 867 CE), an immense dialogue unfolding an impressive cosmological system, and as the influential transmitter of Greek Christian theology to the medieval West, notably through his translations of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus Confessor.

Eriugena's philosophy centers around God, understood in Neoplatonic terms as an infinite, transcendent "immovable self-identical one" (*unum et idipsum immobile, Peri.* I.476b). This God is incomprehensive to created, finite minds (angels, humans) but through His freely willed theophanies (*theofaniai*, divine manifestations) He becomes manifest to and can be apprehended by His creation. The One, as highest principle, engenders all things timelessly, causing them to proceed into their genera, species, and individuals located in space and time, and then retrieves them back into itself. This cosmological process is triadic or Trinitarian, involving a dialectic of oneness, outgoing and return. All created entities, including human nature, are to be understood as eternal "ideas" (*ideae, notiones*) in the mind of God. But only human nature is made in the divine image and likeness. Humankind, therefore, plays a special role in the dialectic of outgoing and return. Eriugena quotes Augustine to the effect that God became man (*inhumanatio*) so that humans can become God (*deificatio*). Humans fail to understand their own true nature as images of God because they are distracted by created, fleeting temporal "appearances" (*phantasiai*), which cloud the intellect and generate the sensible spatiotemporal realm. However, through the practice of intellectual contemplation (*theoria, intellectus*), assisted by the grace of divine illumination (which is the receiving of a divine self-manifestation, *theophania*), humans may return to and achieve unification (*henosis*) with God. 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, Eriugena says, is nothing other than perfect human nature. A select few (e.g., St. Paul) will even undergo deification (*deificatio, theosis*). Eriugena's account of nature as inclusive of God and creation has been interpreted as pantheist. Eriugena, however, stresses both the immanence of God in creation and His transcendence beyond it.

Biographical Information

The place, date, and circumstances of Eriugena's birth and early life are unknown. Surviving *testimonia* suggest that he was born in Ireland around 800 CE. A letter (c. 850/851 CE) by Bishop Pardulus of Laon refers to a certain Irishman named "Joannes" at the palace of the King of France (*Patrologia Latina* [hereafter "PL"] 121:1052a), who was engaged in a theological controversy. He signed his translation of Dionysius (PL 122:1236a) with "Eriugena," meaning "Irish born." Biblical glosses attributed to Eriugena includes several Old Irish terms testifying to his knowledge of Irish. Furthermore, Bishop Prudentius of Troyes refers to Eriugena's "Irish eloquence" (*Celtica eloquentia*, PL 115:1194a), albeit while disparaging his employment of dialectic in theology.

Eriugena had strong links with the court of King Charles the Bald (Carolus Calvus) and associated ecclesiastical centers (Rheims, Laon, Soissons, and Compiègne). He was esteemed as an erudite Liberal Arts master: Bishop Florus calls him "academic and learned" (*scholasticus et eruditus*, PL 119:103a). Two partial commentaries (c. 840–c. 850) on *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury,* the liberal arts handbook of Martianus Capella testify to his

familiarity with the Liberal Arts tradition of Cicero, Cassiodorus, Isidore, and others. Eriugena wrote poems that confirm his Greek learning and celebrate his royal patron King Charles. Eriugena died around 877 CE.

Eriugena's Thought

The Treatise on Predestination (c. 851)

Around 850 Eriugena was commissioned by Hincmar, Archbishop of Rheims, and Pardulus, Bishop of Laon, to rebut a treatise on predestination by Gottschalk of Orbais (806–868), a priest in Hincmar's jurisdiction who interpreted Augustine as teaching a "twin predestination" (*gemina praedestinatio*), namely, of the elect to heaven and of the damned to hell. Eriugena's opposing treatise, *De divina praedestinatione* (*On Divine Predestination*, c. 851, hereafter *De praed.*), employed dialectical argument rather than scriptural citation to reject the twin predestination thesis. Eriugena invokes the divine unity, transcendence and infinite goodness to show that that there can by but one predestination. God's nature is one, and so is His predestination. God wants all humans to be saved. He does not predestine souls to damnation; humans damn themselves through their own free choices. Furthermore, "sin, death, unhappiness are not from God. Therefore God is not the cause of them" (*De praed.* 3.3). God cannot predestine to evil since evil is nonbeing. Properly speaking, God, who is outside time and acts "all at once" (*semel et simul*), cannot be said to foreknow or to predestine (*De praed.* 9.6), terms that are transferred from created things (*De praed.* 9.7). Eriugena's tract was itself considered suspect. He was accused of "Origenism" and "Pelagianism" by his former supporter Prudentius (see PL 115:1010c) and the treatise was condemned as "Irish porridge" (*pultes scottorum*) at the councils of Valence (855) and Langres (859), in part for its employment of dialectic instead of scriptural commentary.

The Translation of Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 860–c. 862 CE)

Notwithstanding this setback, around 860, King Charles commissioned Eriugena to translate a manuscript of the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite (then considered to be St. Denis, patron saint of Francia). This manuscript had been presented to Charles' father, Louis the Pious, by the Byzantine Emperor Michael the Second in 827. Eriugena enthusiastically adopted the Areopagite's negative theology, according to which negations concerning God are "more true" (*verior*), "better" (*melior*) and "more apt" than affirmations. Affirmative appellations do not "literally" (*proprie*) apply to God and must be understood analogically or

"through metaphor" (*per metaforam, translative*). God is not literally "Father," "King," and so on. Negations are more appropriate to express the divine transcendence. God is more properly not being, not truth, not goodness, and so on. Following Dionysius, Eriugena describes God as "beyond being," "more than being," "neither one nor oneness," and "beyond assertion and denial."

Following his Dionysius translation (c. 862), Eriugena translated other Greek Christian works, including Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio*, Maximus Confessor's *Ambigua ad Ioannem* (*Difficulties in Response to John*) and his *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* (*Questions in Response to Thalassius*), and possibly Epiphanius' *Anchoratus. De Fide* (*The Anchorite. Concerning Faith*). He also wrote a long commentary on Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy* (*Expositiones in hierarchiam coelestem*), a fragmentary *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (*Commentarius in Evangelium Iohannis*), and a sermon (*Homilia in Johannem*) on the Prologue to John's Gospel, all of which show the influence of the Greek theological tradition.

The Dialogue *Periphyseon. De divisione naturae* (c. 867)

Eriugena's *Periphyseon* (hereafter *Peri.*), also called *De divisione naturae* (*On the Division of Nature*), written between 860–867 CE, is an extensive treatise on cosmology, anthropology, and theology, written as a dialogue between Master and Pupil, and offering a grand synthesis of Greek and Latin Christian theologies. At the outset, Eriugena defines nature as including both "God and the creature." *Natura* is the "totality of all things" (*universitas rerum*) that are (*ea quae sunt*) and are not (*ea quae non sunt*). Echoing similar divisions in Augustine (*City of God* Bk. V.9, PL 41:151) and Marius Victorinus (*Ad Candidum, To Candidus*), nature is divided into four "divisions" or "species" (*Peri.* I.441b–442a): that which creates and is not created (i.e., God); that which creates and is created (i.e., Primary Causes or Ideas); that which is created and does not create (i.e., Temporal Effects, created things); that which is neither created nor creates (i.e., nonbeing, nothingness). This fourfold division of nature represents God as the Beginning, Middle, and End of all things. The four divisions unfold from and enfold back into the divine Unity. Creation is a process of divine self-articulation; the entire cosmic drama of expression and return takes place within the Godhead. Human nature, as the image of God, plays a very direct role in the cosmic process of the divine self-manifestation and self-gathering.

In *Periphyseon* Book One, Eriugena outlines "five ways of interpreting" (*quinque modi interpretationis*) the manner in which things may be said to be or not to be (I.443c–

446a). According to this complex and original account, attribution of being or nonbeing is dependent on the mode of approach and care needs to be taken. Thus, when Eriugena calls God "nothing," he means that God transcends all created being (*nihil per excellentiam*). Matter, on the other hand, is "nothing through privation" (*nihil per privationem*).

Eriugena's fourfold division offers a rich negative theological account of God and His relation to creation. God, as uncreated and creating, transcends everything created and is the "negation of everthing" (*negatio omnium*, III.686d). God is not "literally" (*proprie*) substance or essence, quantity, quality, relation, place, or time. He is *superessentialis* (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" (*Peri.* I.443b). Sometimes, Eriugena speaks simply of the "divine superessentiality" (*divina superessentialitas*, *Peri.* III.634b), or, quoting Dionysius' *Divine Names* I 1–2 (PG 3:588b–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.

Eriugena understands creation as the self-manifestation of the divine (*Peri.* I.455b), whereby the hidden transcendent God manifests Himself in divine outpourings or theophanies (I.446d). Moreover, there is a strong unity between Creator and created, as there is between cause and effect. God and the creature are not 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. . ." (*Peri.* III.678c).

Although Eriugena asserts the identity of God and creation, he explicitly rejects the view that God is the "genus" or "whole" of which the creatures are "species" or "parts." Only metaphorically (*metaforice*, translative) can it be said that God is a "genus" or a "whole." As is typical in Christian Neoplatonism, the divine immanence in creation is balanced by the divine transcendence and impassibility. God is indeed "form of all things" but He is also formless and above being. The creature can therefore never be simply identified with God. On the other hand, the creature, considered in itself (following St. Augustine) must be considered to be nothing (*nihilum*).

Periphyseon Book Two discusses the Primary Causes (*causae primordiales*) or "divine willings" (*theia thelemata*), through which God creates all things. Eriugena's conception of these Causes draws on the Platonic Forms, the Stoic–Augustinian notion of eternal reasons (*rationes aeternae*), Dionysius' account of the divine names, and Maximus' notion of "divine willings" (*theia thelemata, divinae voluntates*). God is infinite and His Causes too are infinite in number. Moreover, there is no hierarchy or precedence among them; Being is not prior to Goodness, or vice versa. Each is in its own way a divine theophany. This "outflowing" (*proodos*; *processio, exitus*) of the Causes creates the whole universe from the highest genus to the lowest species and individuals (*atoma*). In his understanding of this causal procession, Eriugena accepts Neoplatonic principles (drawn from the tradition of Proclus) concerning causation: like produces like; incorporeal causes produce incorporeal effects; causes that are immaterial, intellectual, and eternal produce effects that are equally immaterial, intellectual, and eternal. Cause and effect are mutually dependent, relative terms (V.910d–912b).

The Primary Causes produce their Effects timelessly. The Effects, for Eriugena, are also originally timeless and incorruptible, but, as they proceed from their essences through their genera, species, and individuals (in a kind of ontological descent through the tree of Porphyry), they become located spatially and temporally but not yet in a corporeal sense. Eriugena seems to postulate two kinds of time – an unchanging time (a reason or ratio in the divine mind, *Peri.* V.906a) and a corrupting time. Since place and time are definitions that locate things, and since definitions are in the mind, place and time are therefore said to be "in the mind" (*in mente*, I.485b). The sensible, corporeal, spatiotemporal appearances of things are produced by the qualities or "circumstances" (*circunstantiae*) of place, time, position, and so on, which surround the incorporeal, eternal essence. Indeed, the entire spatiotemporal world (including corporeal human bodies) is a consequence of the Fall. For Eriugena, God, foreseeing that human beings would fall, created a body and a corporeal world for them. But this corporeal body is not essential to human nature, and in the return of all things to God the corporeal body will be transformed into the spiritual body (*spirituale corpus*). The corporeal world will return to its incorporeal essence, and place understood as extension will return back into its cause or reason as a definition in the mind (*Peri.* V.889d). Since there is nothing outside God (the transcendent nothingness), creation "from nothing" (ex nihilo) does not mean creation from anything outside God; rather it means creation out

of God Himself (*a se*). All creation comes from God and remains within Him.

Periphyseon Books Four and Five draw heavily on Maximus Confessor's and Gregory of Nyssa's accounts of the return (*reditus*) of all things to God. In particular, Eriugena explicates the role of human nature in the cosmic process of return. Eriugena's theological anthropology is a radical reinterpretation of the biblical theme of humans as made in the image and likeness of God (*in imaginem et similitudinem dei*). Eriugena begins from the ideal nature of humanity had it not sinned. Eriugena argues that paradise and original human nature were entirely spiritual and intellectual. By nature, every effect returns to its cause. Corporeal things return to their incorporeal causes; the temporal to the eternal, the finite to the infinite. As part of this general return, the corporeal, temporal, material world becomes essentially incorporeal, timeless, and intellectual. Human nature will return to its Primary Cause or "Idea" (*notio*) in the mind of God. "Paradise" is actually the scriptural name for this ideal human nature in the mind of God. Humans who refuse to abandon their "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*), merging 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*, *Peri.* V.935c).

In Book Four, Eriugena rejects the classical definition of human nature as "rational animal" since it does not capture the true status of human beings. Just as, according to the dialectic of affirmative and negative theology, God may be said to be or not to be (*Deus est; deus not est*), so too human nature may be said to be animal or not animal. Following Gregory of Nyssa, Eriugena also denies that human nature is a "microcosm." Rather, human nature is "a certain intellectual concept formed eternally (*aeternaliter facta*) in the divine mind" (IV.768b). 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. Perfect human nature would have possessed the fullest knowledge of its Creator, of itself, and of everything else had it not sinned (*Peri.* IV.778c). Just as God knows that He is but not what He is, since He is uncircumscribable, so too human nature knows that it is but not what it is. Human self-ignorance mirrors the divine self-ignorance and is a mark of the infinite and transcendent nature of the human as of the divine. Human nature, without the Fall, would have ruled the universe (IV.782c). Similarly, perfect human nature would have enjoyed omniscience and other attributes enjoyed by God. 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 (IV.759a–b). The Fall is construed by Eriugena as the descent from intellect into sense: *intellectus* is distracted by the voluptuousness of sensibility (aesthesis). Eriugena follows Gregory of Nyssa's view that sexual difference is a consequence of the Fall and not a defining characteristic of human nature. Perfect human being is neither male nor female, just as "in Christ there is neither male nor female" (*Peri.* IV.795a).

Christ as the divine idea of human nature is the centerpiece of the entire cosmic procession and return. Christ as Logos is the manifestation of the divine and also "the perfect human" (*vir autem perfectus est Christus*, *Peri.* IV.743b). Christ is actually what all human beings can be and will be, and that is precisely the promise of salvation for Eriugena (*Peri.* II.545a).For Eriugena, a true image is identical to its exemplar in all respects "except number" or "subject" (*Peri.* IV.778a). Neither divine nor human nature is in space or time, both are incorporeal and hence numerical difference, or difference in subject, can only have the Neoplatonic meaning that the first will always differ from what comes after the first. God is creator and humankind is created, but since creation is self-manifestation, that amounts to saying that God manifests himself fully as human nature. Sometimes Eriugena, quoting Maximus Confessor (e.g., V.879c–880a), says that humankind is by grace (*per gratiam*) what God is by nature. On the other hand, all nature is a theophany; nature is the outpouring of grace. Every gift (*donum*) is a given (datum), and vice versa. The creation of human nature is both the free outpouring of the divine will and the self-expression of the divine nature. Human nature stands closer to God than any other creature (including the angels, who are not made in the image and likeness of God).

Eriugena places extraordinary emphasis on the infinity and boundlessness of both God and human nature. The divine causes are infinite in number and so are the theophanies under which God may be viewed. Human progress to Godhead proceeds infinitely. Holy Scripture too has infinite richness (*Sacrae scripturae interpretatio infinita est*, *Peri.* II.560a), its interpretations are as innumerable as the colors in a peacock's tail (IV.749c). Human

capacity for perfection and self-transcendence is also end-less (a theme that will reappear in Renaissance Humanism).

Eriugena's Influence

Eriugena's *Periphyseon* had influence in France at the schools of Laon, Auxerre, and Corbie. It was popular again in the twelfth century (with Hugh of Saint Victor, Alanus of Lille, and Suger of Saint-Denis) when circulated in the "edition" of William of Malmsebury and the para-phrase of Honorius Augustodunensis. Eriugena's transla-tions of Dionysius circulated widely during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, as did his *Homily on the Prologue to John* (often attributed to Origen). In the thirteenth cen-tury, the *Periphyseon* was somewhat unfairly associated with the doctrines of two Paris theologians, David of Dinant and Amaury of Bène, and was condemned in 1210 and 1225. Eriugena was also, again unfairly, linked with certain views on the Eucharist associated with Berengar of Tours. Meister Eckhart of Hochheim (c. 1260–c. 1328) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) were familiar with the *Periphyseon.* Eriugena's conception of human nature as *imago dei* influenced Renaissance Humanism. Thomas Gale produced the first printed edition of Eriugena's works in 1687, which was soon listed on the papal *Index of Prohibited Books*. In the nineteenth century, Hegel and his followers revived Eriugena as the forefather of specu-lative idealism, and process theologians also acknowl-edged his dynamic conception of the divine. New critical editions of Eriugena's works contributed to a revival of interest in Eriugena in the twentieth century.

See also: ► Anselm of Canterbury ► Augustine ► Being ► Boethius ► Carolingian Renaissance ► Church Fathers ► Evil, The Problem of ► Gregory of Nyssa ► Greek Texts Translated into Latin ► Humanism and Medieval Philos-ophy ► Liberal Arts ► Maximus Confessor ► Meister Eck-hart ► Metaphysics ► Nicholas of Cusa ► Platonism, Medieval ► Pseudo-Dionysius, The Areopagite ► Time

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