

Medieval Neoplatonism and the Dialectics of Being and Non-being

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In memory of Werner Beierwaltes (1931–2019)

Introduction: Neoplatonism in the Medieval Period

In this chapter, I propose to introduce medieval Neoplatonism by focusing in particular on the pivotal figure of John Scottus Eriugena. Eriugena is pivotal because he had access not just to the Latin Christian Neoplatonism of Augustine, Marius Victorinus, Boethius and others, but because he could read Greek and was able to translate and interpret the works of Greek Christian Neoplatonists, including Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus Confessor. This meant that Eriugena has the most expansive vision of the Neoplatonic tradition in the medieval period, up to the rediscovery of the Greek manuscripts of Plotinus and Proclus by Renaissance humanists such as Ficino and others.

The term ‘Neoplatonism’ was developed by nineteenth-century German historians of philosophy to refer to those philosophers in the later Roman period who sought to synthesise the views of Plato, as presented in the various dialogues, into a single coherent system, especially focusing on the need to place some order on the Forms discussed by Plato. Plotinus (201–70), who wrote in Greek, is normally considered the founder of Neoplatonism (although he himself was influenced by those now called the ‘Middle Platonists’ (see Dillon 1977). In his *Enneads* (Gerson 2017) Plotinus expounds a complex system that claims that all things depend upon and receive their being from the One which is ‘beyond being’ and ‘unnameable’ (Corrigan 2004). Neoplatonism, broadly speaking, prioritises the transcendent, unnameable One as the source of all things. All other things flow in an ‘outgoing’ (*proodos, exitus*) from the One in a way that makes all these things derivative of and secondary to the One. According to Plotinus, the highest principle, the One, proceeds into *nous* (intellect), which is a unity of thinking and thought, and hence the first Dyad. *Nous* then proceeds into soul (*psyche*, see Emilsson 2007). This outflowing reaches its limit when the outgoing exhausts itself into nothingness or unformed matter. There is then a ‘return’ (ἐπιστροφή, *epistrophe, reditus*) of all things to the One.

Porphyrus (c. 234–c. 305), Plotinus’s student and editor, who also wrote in Greek, attempted further to reconcile the thought of Plato with that of Aristotle. Both Plotinus and Porphyry were pagans but many of their works were translated and synthesised by late Latin Christian writers, such as Marius Victorinus. Proclus (c. 412–85) is often seen as the last of the pagan Neoplatonic philosophers, and his literary remains are the most extensive. Proclus, head of the Platonic Academy in Athens, had extensive but subterranean influence in the Middle Ages

(primarily through his Christian follower, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite). Plotinus's works, on the other hand, were mostly unavailable in the Latin West during the Middle Ages until the fifteenth century when they were translated into Latin and commented on by Marsilio Ficino (Gersh 2014).

Plotinus, Porphyry and Proclus represented a late pagan resistance to Christianity, but Christian thinkers (St Gregory of Nyssa, St Ambrose, St Augustine) turned to Neoplatonism precisely to articulate, in an intellectually coherent and systematic way, the truths of their revealed religion, particularly about the nature of the deity as a transcendent unity and the total dependence of all created reality on the divine One (Beierwaltes 1969; Sheldon-Williams 1970a). Plato was considered to have anticipated the Christian account of creation with his account, in the *Timaeus*, of a divine artificer who made the world (and the *Timaeus* was known through the partial Latin translation of Calcidius). According to his autobiographical *Confessions* (Chadwick 2009), Augustine tells us he was convinced of the truth of Christianity by his reading of what he called the 'books of the Platonists' (*libri platoniorum*, *Confessions* Book VII.20.26) – now thought most probably to be the Roman rhetor Marius Victorinus's translations of Plotinus and Porphyry – texts which convinced Augustine that truth was incorporeal, that God was eternal, unchanging, the cause of all things – paralleling the truths revealed in St Paul's epistles. In his early *De vera religione* (*On True Religion*) IV. 7, Augustine claimed one need only change a few words to see how closely Plato resembled Christianity. But even in his much later work, *De civitate Dei* (*The City of God*), Plato is portrayed as the philosopher closest to Christianity (*City of God* Book VIII, chapter 11). Augustine frequently refers positively to Plato and to the Platonists ('*Platonici*', see Gersh and Hoenen 2002). In his *De Trinitate* (*On the Trinity*), furthermore, Augustine uses many of the Neoplatonic triads, for example, being-intellect-will, as images of the divine Trinity. St Augustine found in the books of the Neoplatonists an account of the divine as an infinite, immaterial, omniscient and transcendent One that helped him to overcome a Manichean-inspired view that God was some kind of refined substance like light.¹ In his *On Diverse Questions* (*De diversis quaestionibus*, Q. LXXXIII), for instance, St Augustine presented and defended a version, which he had found in Cicero, of Plato's Forms as eternal archetypes. St Augustine also regarded the Neoplatonic account of non-being as an absence or privation as a decisive argument against the Manichean position that evil is a really existent being in the world. According to Augustine, the Manicheans maintained that two equal and opposite principles of light and darkness governed the universe. He calls this the theory of 'two substances' (*opinio duarum substantiarum*, *Confessions* Book VII.14, Chadwick 2009). Augustine embraced the Neoplatonic conception that all beings derive their being from one source – the infinite transcendent divinity – and, strictly speaking, evil is not something existent but rather the absence of goodness. This diagnosis of evil as privation and lack continues in the later Neoplatonists, including Pseudo-Dionysius. In *Divine Names*, Dionysius removes evil from the realm of being and *non-being*: 'Evil is not a being . . . nor is it a non-being; for nothing is completely a non-being, unless it is said to be in the Good in the sense of beyond being . . . It has a greater nonexistence and otherness from the Good than non-being has' (*Divine Names* IV.19 716d, Lúibhéid 1987, p. 85). At *Divine Names* IV.32.732d, Dionysius says that evil is 'unfounded, uncaused, indeterminate, unborn, inert, powerless, disordered. It is errant, indefinite, dark, insubstantial, never in itself possessed of any existence' (Lúibhéid 1987: 94).

¹ See Chapter 1 in this volume by Karmen MacKendrick and Chapter 17 by Wayne Hankey.

Despite his admiration for Plato (Augustine had even suggested that Plato had studied with the prophet Jeremiah), Augustine, however, had many issues with Neoplatonism including the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, and the claim that the return of all things to the One happened as a matter of necessity rather than through freely given divine grace. Augustine also considered the doctrine of the incarnation to be a challenge to the Neoplatonist view that body descends from soul and returns thereto.

In thinking about the nature of the divine, Augustine places a great emphasis on the saying from Exodus 3:14 that God is He Who Is, pure being, eternal being, fullness of being. The Neo-Thomist revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (figures such as Étienne Gilson [1952, 1954] and Jacques Maritain [1931]) sought to emphasise that medieval Christian philosophy began from the recognition of God as absolute being, as pure *esse*, or act of existence. According to this interpretation, Christian metaphysics focuses on the infinite *being* of the divine understood as pure unlimited act and also on the limited and dependent being of created natures. Thomas Aquinas, as a radical Aristotelian, came to be regarded as the pinnacle of Christian metaphysics in the Middle Ages and the Neo-Thomists elevated Aristotelian substance metaphysics as the most appropriate tradition to articulate the truths of Christian faith. This Neo-Thomist version of the history of philosophy, however, greatly downplayed the influence of Neoplatonism in the Christian Middle Ages, downplaying even the impact of the Pseudo-Dionysius on Thomas's own thought. Thomas Aquinas cites Dionysius more frequently than he does Aristotle, for example.

In fact, contrary to the interpretation of Neo-Thomism, the Neoplatonic tradition is the most dominant philosophical tradition in medieval Latin philosophy, from the writings of St Augustine to Albertus Magnus, at which point the rediscovery and Latin translation of Aristotle's texts led to an Aristotelian revival. But the Platonist tradition continued especially in the faculties of theology in the new universities of Paris, Bologna and Oxford, as witnessed by the writings of St Bonaventure and Meister Eckhart (himself a Dominican and thus a follower of St Thomas Aquinas).

John Scottus Eriugena: Pivotal Christian Neoplatonist

In the remainder of this chapter, I shall investigate the importance of the Neoplatonic contribution to medieval philosophy, focusing in particular on the writings of the medieval Irish Christian philosopher, John Scottus Eriugena (c. 800–c. 877), specifically his great dialogue in five books, *Periphyseon* or *On Natures*.² Eriugena occupies a pivotal position in the history of

² The main edition of Eriugena's *Periphyseon* for many years was the Patrologia Latina edition by H.-J. Floss, *Johannis Scoti Opera quae supersunt Omnia, Patrologia Latina* (hereafter 'PL') vol. 122 (Paris, 1853). The current critical edition is Édouard Jauneau, *Iohannis Scoti seu Eriugena Periphyseon curavit Eduardus A. Jauneau*, 5 vols, *Corpus Christianorum Continuation Mediaevalis* (= CCCM) nos. 161, 162, 163, 164 and 165 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996–2003). The *Periphyseon* (hereafter 'Peri.') is cited according to the following translations: I. P. Sheldon-Williams (ed.), *Iohannis Scoti Eriugena Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae)* Book One (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968); Book Two (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1970b); Book Three, with John O'Meara (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1981); Book Four. Ed. E. Jauneau (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1995). There is a complete English translation by I. P. Sheldon-Williams and J. J. O'Meara, published in John J. O'Meara (ed.), *Eriugena. Periphyseon* (Dumbarton Oaks/Montréal: Bellarmin, 1987). For more on Eriugena's life and writings, see the classic study by Dom Maïul Cappuyns, *Jean Scot Erigène: sa vie, son oeuvre, sa pensée* (Louvain: Abbaye du Mont César and Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1933) and see Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena. A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

medieval Neoplatonism, as he was one of the few scholars of his day who could read Greek. Eriugena's uniqueness in part stems from his harmonious synthesis of the Greek, Eastern Christian authorities (chiefly Dionysius, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus Confessor), on the one hand, and Latin, Roman Christian authorities, especially Augustine, Boethius, Macrobius, on the other (Koch 1969; Carabine 1995). He translated and commented on the works of Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus Confessor (see Jauneau 1988; Laga and Steel 1990) and also translated some works by Gregory of Nyssa (Cappuyns 1965) and possibly others. Eriugena also had familiarity with Rufinus's Latin translation of Origen's *On First Principles* (see Moran 1992a) and was often linked with Origen in the Middle Ages (his *Homily on the Prologue to John* circulated under the name of Origen; Jauneau 1969). Eriugena shows extensive knowledge of Plato's *Timaeus* in the Latin translation of Calcidius and also in his Commentary on Martianus Capella (whom he sees as a Platonist; Gersh and Hoenen 2002: 75). For Eriugena, Plato is the 'highest' (*summus*) of all philosophers (*Peri*. I.476c) and the one who looked beyond created things to discover the Creator (*Peri*. III.724a).

Eriugena always declares a preference for the Greeks and was especially influenced by the negative theology of Dionysius (McGinn 1975). One could say that Eriugena was awoken from his dogmatic, Augustinian slumbers by reading the *Corpus Dionysii*, contained in one manuscript given to him by the Carolingian king, Charles the Bald. His encounter with Dionysius transformed his life and gave him a passion for negative theology framed around the idea of the not-being of the divine.

As a convinced Neoplatonist, Eriugena sees God as the unnameable, transcendent One, who may properly be called 'non-being' because He is 'above being'. Eriugena not only offers the term 'Nothing' (*nil*) as a name for God but also claims that God is 'beyond essence' (*superessentialis*) and 'beyond being' (*super esse*). Eriugena is, in many ways, the most consistent and also the most systematic Christian Neoplatonist of the Middle Ages prior to Albertus or Cusanus. In this chapter, therefore, I shall focus on Eriugena's account of 'nothingness', or, to borrow a term from Schelling, his *meontology* (from μή, *me* and ὄν, *on*). I shall claim that Eriugena offers the most elaborate discussion of the meanings of 'non-being' (*non esse, quae non sunt*) in medieval Latin philosophy, far outstripping what was available from Augustine, Boethius or even Marius Victorinus (who had translated Plotinus and was familiar with Porphyry). Furthermore, Eriugena reads Augustine as also recognising the transcendence and unknowability of God. Indeed, Eriugena argues that Augustine actually has a version of the *via negativa*, when he proclaims in *De Ordine*, for example, that God is better known by not knowing (*qui melius nesciendi scitur, cuius ignorantia vera est sapientia*; *Peri*. I.510b).

Eriugena highlights Augustine's determination to go beyond being in the description of the divine nature. Augustine recognises that the term 'substance' (Greek: οὐσία, *ousia*) does not fully capture the nature of the divine. The divine transcends all the categories of Aristotle.

Both Augustine and Boethius had insisted that God transcends all the Aristotelian categories (and Maximus Confessor also claimed the categories apply only to the created world and not to the divine being that transcends them). Thus Boethius, in his *On the Trinity* (*De Trinitate*), chapter IV (with which Eriugena was familiar), proclaims that God is not substance in the normal sense of the categories:

There are in all ten categories which can be universally predicated of all things, namely, substance, quality, quantity . . . But when anyone turns these to predication of God, all the things that can be predicated (*quae praedicari*) are changed . . . For when we say 'God' (*deus*) we seem indeed to denote a substance; but it is such as is supersubstantial (*quae sit ultra substantiam*). (Stewart et al. 1918: 16–18)

There is then, already in the Latin Neoplatonic tradition of Augustine and Boethius the move away from the simple identification of God with ‘ousia’ or ‘to on’ (being) and the recognition that God’s nature transcends being. The Neoplatonic tradition had similarly described the One as ‘beyond being’ and ‘beyond intellect’. But this tradition of divine transcendence is carried much further by Dionysius the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius), who was, most probably, based on textual evidence, a Christian follower of Proclus (Dillon and Klitenic 2007). Indeed, it is through Dionysius (and also through the anonymous *Liber de causis*; Sezgin 2000) that Proclus’s thought influenced the Latin West until Proclus’s own texts emerged in the Renaissance and were studied intensively by Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64; see Moran 2008), among others.

There is a strong tradition – stemming from Augustine but greatly amplified by Dionysius the Areopagite – that God, in God’s inexpressible infinity, transcends being, and is better said as ‘not to be’. Dionysius’s *De divinis nominibus* (*On The Divine Names*; Lúibhéid 1987), especially, examines Scriptural and philosophical appellations for the divine and argues that they all fail to fully express the nature of the highest being, who is nameless and beyond all names. Names are really processions from the divinity or ‘divine appearances’ (theophanies) and do not ‘properly’ pick out the divinity itself in its own nature, because its nature transcends all names and all concepts. Negations, for Dionysius, express the nature of the divine more accurately than affirmations. This theme is expressed even more radically in Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology*, which had enormous influence on the later medieval mystical tradition, transmitting to the Latin West the Platonism of the *Parmenides* in the form of negative theology. Dionysius is the source of the idea of the divine transcendence above all creation so that God cannot be called by any of the names of created things except by a kind of metaphor.

Neoplatonic Christian writers from John Scottus Eriugena to Nicholas of Cusa followed Dionysius in describing God as both transcendent beyond being or essence (*superessentialis*) and yet present in all creation. God is not essence but is ‘more than essence’ (*plus quam essentia*), or beyond essence, ‘superessential’ (*superessentialis*). But God is also the cause of all things and hence is the ‘form of all created beings’ (*forma omnium*). Eriugena even described God as the ‘form of forms’ (*forma formarum*). But God is also formless and beyond form. God is the cause, as Eriugena puts it, not only of things like God but also of the unlike. God is the cause of all opposites. God, for Eriugena, is the ‘opposite of opposites’ (*oppositio oppositorum*). Nicholas of Cusa, especially his *De docta ignorantia* (Hoffmann and Klibansky 1932; *On Learned Ignorance*, Hopkins 1985), developed a strongly Neoplatonic account of the nature of the divine being who so transcends and reconciles all oppositions as to be called the ‘coincidence of opposites’ (*coincidentia oppositorum*), echoing Eriugena’s view of God as ‘the opposite of opposites’ (*oppositio oppositorum*; see Moran 1990).

Eriugena even speaks of God as the ‘essence beyond essence’ (*superessentialis essentia*) and as the ‘divine superessentiality’ (*divina superessentialitas*; *Peri.* III.634b), and, quoting from Dionysius’s *Divine Names* I 1–2 (PG 588b–c), the ‘superessential and hidden divinity’ (*superessentialis et occulta divinitas*; *Peri.* I.510b). Composite terms such as ‘superessential’ (*superessentialis*) bring together the two kinds of theology – positive and negative. The term outwardly appears to be affirmative in meaning, Eriugena says, but, actually, the Latin prefix ‘super’ (Greek: *hyper*), meaning ‘above’, has a negative or ‘abdlicative’ force (*virtus abdicativae*; *Peri.* I.462c). For Eriugena, superlative terms (‘more than’) really have a negative connotation. He writes:

For when it is said: ‘It is superessential’, this can be understood by me as nothing else but a negation of essence (*negatio essentiae*). For he who says ‘It is superessential’, openly denies (*aperte negat*) that it is essential, and therefore although the negative is not expressed in the words pronounced, yet the hidden meaning of it is not hidden from those who consider them well. (*Peri.* I.462a–b)

God is not ‘essence’ (*ousia, essentia*) but is more than *ousia* and the cause of all *ousiai* (*Peri*. I.464a). The Aristotelian categories are not predicated *proprie* but *metaphorice* of God. Indeed, there was a long Neoplatonic tradition that argued that the Aristotelian categories (substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, etc.) circumscribe the created universe but cannot be applied literally to the Creator who is beyond essence, who has no quantity, has no relations, and so on (see Moran 1992b).

The Claim that God is ‘Not Being’ (*Nihil*)

The context of Eriugena’s discussion of nothing is the meaning of creation from nothing. Medieval Christian philosophers struggled to explicate the idea of the divine creation of the world from nothing (*ex nihilo*). What is that ‘nothing’ from which God created the universe?

In his dialogue *Periphyseon* (c. 867 AD), a dialogue between a Master (Nutritor) and a disciple (Alumnus), which offers an entire cosmology of ‘universal nature’, Eriugena makes the radical and shocking claim that God can be understood as ‘Not-being’ (*Nihilum*, glossing the Greek *ouden*). He is translating the neuter pronoun and adverb οὐδέν (*ouden*) meaning ‘in no way’, ‘not at all’, ‘nothing’ as *nihil*. Forms of *ouden* appear frequently in the New Testament but are never applied directly to God. Yet Eriugena writes in *Periphyseon* Book Three that God is ‘often’ called ‘nothing’ in Scripture:

For according to the rules of theology the power of negation is stronger than that of affirmation [*plus negationis quam affirmationis uirtus ualet*] for investigating the sublimity and incomprehensibility of the Divine Nature; and anyone who looks into it closely will not be surprised that often in the Scriptures God Himself is called by the name Nothing [*eo uocabulo, quod est nihilum, saepe in scripturis ipsum deum uocari*]. (*Peri*. 684d–685a; Jeauneau 1999: 93)

Especially in *Periphyseon* Book Three (III.634a–690b), Eriugena discusses various ways in which being and non-being can be understood in what amounts to a mini-treatise on nothing (*de nihilo*). There is a chapter entitled ‘*de nihilo*’ commencing at *Periphyseon* III.634a. I.–P. Sheldon-Williams calls it a ‘little treatise’ on the *quaestio de nihilo* (Sheldon-Williams 1981: 5, note 1), following Gustavo Piemonte (Piemonte 1968). Jeauneau agrees and singles out Eriugena’s concept of ‘*le Néant divin*’ (Jeauneau 1999: ix; see also Jeauneau 1997b). Indeed, Eriugena will go so far as to argue that all things can be thought of as ‘nothingness’ in one form or another: God, the primary causes, corporeal things, matter, are all species of non-being. It would later influence Nicholas of Cusa,³ in particular, and his concept of God as ‘*non aliud*’ or ‘not other’ (Hopkins 1987).

The Superessential Goodness of the Divine is ‘Beyond Being’

The Neoplatonists thought of the One and the Good as ‘beyond being’ (a notion already found in Plato, *Republic* 509b, the Good is *epekeina tes ousias*). The Christian Neoplatonists – Augustine, Eriugena and Dionysius – all see God as the *summum bonum* and therefore as preceding being in some sense. Eriugena could read in Pseudo-Dionysius of the priority of goodness over being. Dionysius writes in *The Celestial Hierarchy*:

One truth must be affirmed above all else. It is that the transcendent deity has out of goodness established the existence of everything and brought it into being. It is characteristic

³ See Chapter 10 in this volume by Peter Casarella.

of the universal cause, of this goodness beyond all, to summon everything to communion with him to the extent that this is possible. Hence everything in some way partakes of the providence flowing out of this transcendent Deity which is the originator of all that is. Indeed, nothing could exist without some share in the being and source of everything. Even the things which have no life participate in this, for it is the transcendent deity which is the existence of every being. (Lúibhéid 1987: 156)

Eriugena follows Dionysius in thinking of the Good as that which is responsible for the movement from non-being to being. It is because of the outpouring of divine goodness that things move from non-existence to existence. Goodness is then prior to being. Eriugena makes this clear in *Periphyseon*, Book Three:

For the Cause of all things, the creative Goodness which is God, created that cause which is called goodness-through-itself first of all for this purpose: that through it all things that are should be brought from non-existents to essences. For it is a property of the divine Goodness to call (*uocare*) the things that were not into existence. For the Divine Goodness and More-than-Goodness is both the essential and superessential cause of the universe that it has established and brought to essence. Therefore if the creator through his goodness brought all things out of nothing so that they might be, the aspect of goodness-in-itself must necessarily precede the aspect of being through itself. For goodness does not come through essence but essence comes through goodness [*Non enim per essentiam introducta est bonitas set per bonitatem introducta est essentia*]. (*Peri.* III. 627c-d)

Eriugena cites the typical Neoplatonic slogan to the effect that ‘all things that are, are in so far as they are good’ (echoing Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana* Book 1, 32.35). If goodness is withdrawn, Eriugena says, then things cannot come to essence (*Peri.* III.628a). Goodness, then, precedes essence (*ousia*) in the meontological scheme.

The Fives Modes of Being and Non-Being as ‘Contemplations’

Right from the opening of his *Periphyseon*, the ‘universal nature’ (*universalis natura, physis*), that is, the subject of the dialogue, is defined as ‘the general name for those things that are and are not’ (*generale nomen . . . omnium quae sunt et quae non sunt*; *Peri.* I.441a). Eriugena then outlines the four ‘divisions’ or ‘forms’ of nature: nature that creates and is not created; nature that creates and is created; nature that is created and does not create; and nature that neither creates nor is created. The first three divisions correspond to God, the Primary Causes and the Created Effects, but the fourth is puzzling. It seems to refer to ‘nothing’ at all.

Eriugena immediately embarks on a discussion of the meaning of being and non-being in relation to ‘five modes of interpretation’ (*quinque modi interpretationis*; *Peri.* I.443a). He often returns to discuss the various ways under which things can be approached and interpreted – various ‘*theoriae*’ or ‘*contemplationes*’. We can think about nothingness from different standpoints. Eriugena builds his cosmological and ontological framework on the idea that the same entity can be understood in different ways depending on how it is viewed. This, of course is exemplified most especially in the fourfold division of nature into that which creates and is not created; that which is created and creates; that which is created and does not create; and, finally, that which neither creates nor is created. The one God is all of these divisions or ‘forms’ or ‘species’ and is each one depending on how God is approached – as Creator, as incarnate in the Son, or as transcendent hiddenness and darkness.

Eriugena usually takes a twofold, dialectical approach to the meaning of nothing: *Nihil* means either *nihil per privationem* or *nihil per excellentiam*. Eriugena frequently speaks of this as ‘*duplex theoria*’, a twofold way of viewing (Beierwaltes 1990). Of course, St Paul and Augustine are also his sources for this twofold mode of viewing – St Paul claims we can approach matters *carналiter* and *spiritualiter* (Romans 8:6) and Augustine distinguishes the *homo inferior* from *homo superior*. Augustine, for instance in *The City of God* (*De Civitate Dei*) Book Eight (Viii.3), states that only purified minds – and not minds tarnished by earthly desires – could grasp the ‘causes of all things’ (see Eriugena; *Peri.* III.688b–c).

Eriugena similarly explains the twofold approach to ‘nothingness’ several times. In Book Three, the student in the dialogue *Alumnus* asks:

But when I hear or say that the divine Goodness [*diuinam bonitatem*] created all things out of nothing [*omnia de nihilo creasse*] I do not understand what is signified by that name, ‘Nothing’ [*eo nomine, quod est nihil*], whether the privation of all essence or substance [*priuatio totius essentiae uel substantia*] or accident, or the excellence of the divine super-essentiality [*diuinae superessentialitatis excellentia*]. (*Peri.* III.634a–b; Jeaneau 1999: 244)

God is legitimately called ‘nothing’ because God is ‘more than being’ (*plus quam esse*; *Peri.* III.634b). God’s ‘ineffable excellence and incomprehensive infinity’ (*Peri.* III.634b) means that God can be said not to be, but it does not follow that God is ‘nothing at all’ (*omnino nihil*), mere nothing, nothing understood through the stripping away of all predicates. Obviously, this discussion of nothingness has a long history in philosophy since Plato’s *Parmenides* and the *Enneads* of Plotinus, but Eriugena can also discover it in his Latin sources (Duclow 1977). Again, Eriugena’s original hermeneutical achievement consists in his ability to identify this radical *meontology* in both his Greek and his Latin sources.

‘Nothing’ in Eriugena’s Latin Sources: Augustine, Boethius and Marius Victorinus

Eriugena first discussed the meaning of ‘non-being’ in his treatise *De praedestinatione* (395a ff.; Brennan 1998: 66–9), where he argued, drawing on Augustine, that evil is not to be understood as substance but as non-being (‘for all that lacks, matter, form and species is, without doubt, nothing’; Brennan 1998: 69) and, therefore, as neither created by God nor known to Him. He develops this argument further in the *Periphyseon* Book Two, for example, where he argues that God’s nature is simple and, therefore, God cannot be said to know evil (*Peri.* II.596a–b); and in Book Five, at *Periphyseon* V.926a, where Eriugena says that God cannot be said to know the wickedness of angels or humans. Of course, the Latin source of this assessment of evil is undoubtedly Augustinian, especially his *Confessions*, which Eriugena knew, but Eriugena also cites Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* XII 7, *De natura boni* 38.38, *De Trinitate* VII.5.10, and his *Contra Epistulam quae uocant Fundamenti* (Brennan 1998: 67).

Eriugena often quotes a powerful passage from St Augustine’s *De Ordine* (*On Order*, Burroso 2007; Green 1970), where Augustine praises the liberal arts for helping theology understand such issues as the nature of nothingness and formless matter:

. . . yet, if he does not know what nothingness is, what formless matter is [*quid sit nihil, quid informis materia*], what an inanimate unformed being is, what a body is, what species in a body is, what place and time are . . . and what are beyond time and forever, anyone ignorant of these matters who nonetheless seeks to inquire and to dispute concerning his own soul,

not to speak of that supreme God Who is better known by not knowing [*qui scitur melius nesciendo*], he indeed will fall into error, to the greatest extent that error is possible. (*De Ordine* 2.16.44; Green 1970: 131)

Eriugena, who loves to cite the line that God is better known by not knowing, was deeply inspired by *De Ordine*. Augustine also discusses nothing in *De Magistro*. For Augustine it is not a sign of something extra-mental but something in the mind. It perhaps indicates the state of mind of not finding what one is looking for (*De magistro* 7).

Augustine also regards creatures in their being as creatures as mere nothingness, as Eriugena and later Eckhart also hold (Lanzetta 1992; Brunn 1993). Thus, Eriugena says in *Periphyseon* Book Three (at *Peri.* III.646b) that every creature considered in itself is nothing, and he cites a passage from St Augustine's *Confessions* Book Seven, which states that creatures are neither entirely being (*nec omnino esse*) nor entirely non-being (*nec omnino non esse*). In general, Augustine sees the corruptibility of all creatures as due to their genesis from nothing, and he believes all creatures have an innate 'desire' to return to nothing, unless they are sustained by their Creator. Thus, in the *Confessions* Book Twelve, he says that bodies may get small but will never fall away into nothingness, on their own. It is not hard to find other references to non-being in the work of Augustine. For example, in *De magistro*, chapter 7, Augustine discusses the meaning of *nihil* and is uncertain as to whether it signifies something or nothing. He wants to say that all signs signify objective realities, but that nothing does not signify an objective reality.

Eriugena may also have had contact with other Latin discussions of non-being – notably, Boethius's *Opuscula sacra*. Eriugena had read Boethius's *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium* and had found there a discussion of nature in which it is remarked that 'nothing' signifies something, but it does not stand for a nature. Boethius distinguishes *nihil* from *natura*. For Boethius, *nihil* signifies 'something' (*aliquid*) but not a nature. *Aliquid* here designates a concept.

Marius Victorinus's theological works (especially *Ad Candidum Arrianum* and *Adversus Arium*; Hadot 1960; Clark 2001) were known in the Carolingian era and are referenced by Alcuin, for instance, and by Hincmar of Reims (Hadot 1954). Eriugena does not mention him specifically, but at least one scholar, Gustavo Piemonte, is convinced Eriugena has access to the text of Marius Victorinus (Piemonte, in Allard 1986). There is one particular passage in *Periphyseon* Book Three (III.634b–c) where Eriugena debates whether God can be called '*non esse*' as some theologians do. Eriugena says he will not allow that God can be called non-being on the basis of a privation; God is *plus quam esse*. Possibly he is referring her to Marius Victorinus, Piemonte believes (see Allard 1986: 108).

For Marius, God is 'above all things, all existents and all non-existents' (*Ad Cand.* 3.1; Clark 2001: 61). God is the cause of being (*esse*) and non-being (*non esse*). God is *ON*. At *Ad Cand.* 3.2.4, he gives his four modes of non-existence. Victorinus posits non-being (*id quod non est*) as divided according to four modes: 'according to negation' (*iuxta negationem*); 'according to being different from another nature' (*iuxta alterius ad aliud naturam*); 'according to "to be" which is not yet and can be', as futural or potential being (*iuxta nondum esse, quod futurum est et potest esse*); and as transcendent non-being, 'to be which is above all the things that are (*iuxta quod supra omnia quae sunt, est esse*)' (*Ad Cand.* 3, 1–2, Clark 2001: 63–4; 4, 1–5; CSEL LXXXIII (Vienna, 1971)). Piemonte sees these four divisions as reminiscent of the first three of Eriugena's *quinque modi* (Allard 1986: 92). Victorinus uses the same argument as Eriugena that privation indicates a prior possession and it is a fantasy to imagine the privation of all being as the cause of being. Generally speaking, there are remarkable parallels between Marius and Eriugena, but Marius does not use Eriugena's distinctive formulation '*per excellentiam*' (Allard 1986: 106). Rather, Marius uses '*per praelationem et per eminentiam*' (*Adv Ar.* IV, 19, 11), but

the intention is the same. Marius's idea of the non-being above being ('*me on hyper to on*') has its source in Porphyry and, in fact, Marius is the conduit of Porphyrian ideas of the principle beyond the One into medieval Neoplatonism. Marius Victorinus operates with a fourfold division (also found in Augustine) between *quae vere sunt* (*ontos onta*), *quae sunt* (*onta*), *quae non vere non sunt* (*meontos meonta*) and *quae non sunt* (*meonta*) (*Ad Cand.* 5, 6–7).

With regard to the Carolingian authors who were Eriugena's immediate predecessors (Marenbon 1981), it is possible that Eriugena knew the work of Fredegisus entitled *Epistola de nihilo et tenebris* (Gennaro 1963), which argued that the term 'nothing' must actually stand for something, since all meaningful terms signify something, as we know Augustine also believed. Fredegisus was an Anglo-Saxon disciple of Alcuin and a member of the Carolingian court, tutor to Charlemagne's sister. He asked a basic question: 'Whether nothing is anything, or not?' (*Nihilne aliquid sit, an non*, Colish 1984). What kind of 'thing' is nihil? He begins with an argument drawn from grammar. Fredegisus argues that all finite nouns signify something. Therefore '*nihil*' must signify something, for example, a human, a stone, a tree (*Omne nomen finitum aliquid significat, ut 'homo', 'lapis', 'lignum'*). Therefore, it is something; and something that is existent (*Nihil autem aliquid significat. Igitur nihil eius significatio est quod est, id est rei existentis*). Fredegisus then turns to Scripture and the meaning of creation *ex nihilo*. *Nihil* is not *materia informis*, he says (as Eriugena will also later affirm). Nothing, Fredegisus concludes, must be something great (*magnum quiddam ac praeclarum*). God knows the nature of this *nihil* even if humans do not. Fredegisus then turns to discuss the meaning of '*tenebrae*' – the darkness that lay over the waters in Genesis. This, too, is something created. If the words '*dies*' and '*lux*' signify something, then so must their opposites *nox* and *tenebrae*. Fredegisus concludes his letter without actually identifying this 'great' non-being with God, as Eriugena would explicitly do, but there is no doubt that his work is pointing in that direction. It is clear from this text from Alcuin's Circle that the problem of non-being was a living issue in Carolingian philosophical and theological debates. But Eriugena takes it to new heights. Eriugena will transform these Latin discussions by integrating them into the even more radical speculations of the Eastern Christian Neoplatonists and especially Dionysius the Areopagite, to whom we now turn.

'Nothing' in Eriugena's Greek Sources: Dionysius the Areopagite

Eriugena found the idea of divine nothingness primarily in Dionysius the Areopagite. In *Periphyseon* Book Five, Eriugena says he was inspired by Dionysius's *Divine Names* to name God as non-being: 'for it shall return into Him, who, because He transcends being, is called Not-Being' (*In ipsum enim, qui propter superessentialitatem suae naturae nihil dicitur, reversus est, Peri.* V.897d). God is 'above being' (*Peri.* V.898b–c). Earlier in *Periphyseon* Book Three, furthermore, Eriugena quotes a long section from Dionysius's *Divine Names* (*De divinis nominibus*) Book Five chapters 4–5 (PG III 817c–820a; Suchla 1990: 182, 1.17–183, 1.17) and chapter 8 (V.8. 821d–824b; Suchla 1990: 182, 1.14–187, 1.12), where Dionysius speaks about 'being' and describes God as ON (ὄν) and also as the 'ante ὄν' (III.682b) or the 'pre-existent' (*ante existens*). Eriugena translates Dionysius as saying: 'He is before all things and has constituted all things in himself' (. . . *ipse est ante omnia et omnia in se constituit, Peri.* III.682c). Eriugena goes on to quote Dionysius, who identifies ON with God (*sic enim uocat deum, Peri.* III.682a, 1.2596 or 'so Dionysius calls God' as Sheldon-Williams translates):

But being itself [*Esse autem ipsum*] is never bereft [*deseritur*] of all things that exist. Being itself, indeed, is from the Pre-Existent; and from it is being; and ὄν (is) the beginning and measure before essence and is not itself being; and being possesses it; and ὄν is the

substantiating beginning and middle and end both of that which exists and of age and all things; and therefore by the Oracles He Who is in truth Pre- $\omega\nu$ is multiplied in every notion of the things that exist, and in Him is properly celebrated what was and what is and what shall be and what has become and what becomes and what shall become. (*Peri*. III.682c-d – translating *Divine Names* V.8.821d–824b; Suchla 1990: 182, 1.14–187, 1.12; Lúibhéid 1987: 101)

The divine being possesses an ineffable, infinite nature that transcends all things and is in some sense prior to or ‘before’ (*ante*) all things. Going further, Eriugena finds a Scriptural basis in what he calls the ‘sacred oracles’ (*sacri eloqui*) or ‘sacred theology’ (*sacra theologia*) for his application of the term ‘non-being’ to God. And the theologians that Eriugena is invoking here are Dionysus, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus – the Greek Christian authorities.

Eriugena, of course, thought of Dionysius⁴ as the convert of St Paul and hence as an authority equivalent to scripture. For Dionysius, the Godhead ($\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\tau\eta\varsigma$, *theotes*, *deitas*) is transcendent ‘oneness’ ($\acute{\epsilon}\nu\acute{o}\tau\eta\varsigma$, *henotes*, *unitas*), ‘a henad unifying all henads’. As Dionysius puts it in his *Divine Names*, the divine is ‘Oneness beyond mind’ (*he hyper noun henotes*, *Divine Names* 588B; Lúibhéid 1987: 50). This Oneness is beyond being and can better be said not to be than to be.

Very early in the *Periphyseon*, at I.443b, Eriugena quotes Dionysius’s *Celestial Hierarchy* iv.1 (PG III.177d1–2; Heil 1986: 20, ll.16–17): ‘For, he says, the being of all things is the Divinity Who is above being’ (*Esse enim, inquit, omnium est super esse diuinitas*, *Peri*. I.443b; Jeaneau 1996: 5). Eriugena will repeat this phrase from Dionysius very often (for example, at *Peri*. I.516c, III.664b and *Peri*. V.903c; as well as in his *Homily on the Prologue to the Gospel of St John* often called *Homilia*, or *Vox spiritualis* [Jeaneau 1969]). As God is *in se* comprehended by no intellect, God is equally incomprehensible from the point of view of the creature that subsists in God (*Peri*. I.443b–c). Later at Book One I.481c, Eriugena cites ‘Gregory the theologian’ (*Gregorius theologus*) and Maximus Confessor’s *I Ambigua* vi. 38 (PG XCI. 1180b8–13) saying that ‘God alone properly subsists above being itself’ (*qui solus super ipsum esse proprie subsistit*) – everything else is located in time and space or can be circumscribed within the categories. God is incomprehensible by reason of His transcendence above all beings.

Eriugena on Creation as Making Eternally ‘from Nothing’

In *Periphyseon* Book Three 680c–d, Eriugena says that God is called *Nihilum* in the Bible. Alumnus asks Nutritor at Book III.680c: ‘But I beg you to explain what Holy Theology means by that name of “Nothing”’ (*Quid autem eo nomine quod est nihilum sancta significat theologia explanari a te peto*). What motivates Eriugena to speak of the divine nothingness, what Jeaneau terms ‘*le néant divin*’?

Book Three as a whole is meant to focus on the third division of nature, namely, that which is created and does not create (*Peri*. III. 619d–620a). Eriugena’s concern for the meaning of ‘nothing’ is largely motivated by his attempt to understand the meaning of the Christian doctrine of divine creation as ‘creation from nothing’. Eriugena frequently says that creation consists in making things ‘from nothing’ (*ex nihilo, de nihilo*), as for instance in his *Expositiones* 4:73–82 (Barbet 1975: 67, *credimus enim ipsum de nihilo omnia fecisse*). But Eriugena also has

⁴ See Chapter 3 in this volume by Lisa Mahoney.

to make sense of Dionysius the Areopagite, who proclaimed that God makes all things and *is made* in all things. God is somehow not just the creator but also is in some sense ‘created’. This appears shocking and scandalous. In the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena has Alumnus express the novelty of this claim:

Alumnus: . . . I thought that only God is *anarchos* (ἀναρχος), that is, without beginning – for He is the Beginning and the End which arises out of no beginning and concludes to no end – whereas all other things begin and tend each to its proper end, and therefore are not eternal *but* made. And incomparably more profound and wonderful than all this seems to be the assertion you made on the authority of St. Dionysius the Areopagite, namely, that God Himself is both the Maker of all things and is made in all things [*deum et omnium factorum esse et in omnibus factum*]; for this was never heard or known [*inauditum et incognitum*] before either by me [*non solum mihi*] or by many [*et multis*], or by nearly all [*ac paene omnibus*]. For if this is the case, who will not at once break out and exclaim in these words: God is in all things and all things God? (*Deus itaque omnia est et omnia deus*, *Peri.* III.650c-d)

Alumnus has never heard that God is in all things and made in all things. In order to discuss this Dionysian claim further, Eriugena turns not to theology but to the liberal arts. The teacher in the dialogue, Nutritor, replies to the student, Alumnus, by asking about his knowledge of the art of arithmetic (*ars arithmeticae*). All numbers are one in the Monad. The numbers are infinite, and these infinite numbers are eternal in the Monad (*Peri.* III.654a), which itself must be infinite. The One contains all numbers potentially. After a long discourse on numbers, which explains how they can be both eternal and also created, Nutritor says it is time to consider again how things can be eternal and made. Eriugena regularly speaks of creation as things coming from the non-existent things into the existent ones (*ex non esse in esse*; *ex non existentibus in existentia*; see Rorem 2005: 107). He often describes creation as a ‘*motus*’ or ‘movement’ – a ‘motion’: see, for instance, *Periphyseon* Book One I.470a:

. . . for all things move through the process of generation from the state of non-existence into the state of existence, for the divine Goodness summons all things out of not-being into being so that they are [created] out of nothing [*ex non existentibus in existentia per generationem moventus ex non esse in esse divina bonitate omnia vocante ut sint de nihilo*] and each one of the things that are is moved by a natural desire [*appetitus*] toward its own essence and genus and species and individuality. (*Peri.* I.470a; Jauneau 1996: 41, ll.1188–95)

There is a general movement of all things from non-existence to existence. Things that do not subsist in themselves but have their being in something else are said to be in motion (*Peri.* I.470a). Eriugena finds this thought in the *De Imagine* (*De hominis opificio*) of Gregory of Nyssa, which he quotes using his own translation of Gregory of Nyssa (PG 44.184c; Cappuyns 1965). This whole discussion of the manner the categories apply to God is in part inspired by the Pseudo-Augustinian *Categoriae decem*. God is not situated in place (*locus*) or time (*tempus*), or quantity, or position, etc. Similarly, Eriugena argues that *ousia*, which subsists by itself is not contained in any place (I.470c).

But there is a puzzle here because normally a cause contains everything that it produces in the effect. If creatures literally came from nothing understood as the absence or privation of being, then this law of causation would be violated.

In this ‘treatise’ on Nothing, Eriugena first considers the traditional view that God is not being but the privation of created being – the absolute privation of all being (III.634c):

Alumnus: By the name ‘nothing’ [*nomine quod est nihilum*], then, is meant the negation and absence [*atque absentia*] of all essence or substance, indeed of all things that are created in nature [*in natura rerum creata*]. (*Peri.* III.635a – ‘absence’ [*absentia*] is added in the text of Rheims – marked in bold in the Jeuneau edition, 1999: 248, ll.1169–73)

Nutritor agrees – saying almost all the commentators on Holy Scripture agree on this. God made everything not out of something but out of nothing at all (*non de aliquo set de omnino nihil*, III.635a). However, Alumnus expresses worries – he is surrounded by ‘dark clouds’ (*nebulis tenebrosis*, I.1180). Alumnus is concerned about the status of the Primordial Causes (*causae primordiales*, III.635c). It had earlier been agreed that these had been made in the Word by the Father – in His Wisdom, all gathered together as one. The concept of the artificer precedes the concept of his art.

Alumnus: For if all things that are, are eternal in the Creative Wisdom, how are they made out of nothing [*quomodo de nihilo sunt facta*]? (*Peri.* III.636a)

The artist [*Artifex*] makes things out of his own art [*ars*] and that art precedes the things that are made in it (*Peri.* III.636a). Nutritor is really at a loss to explain why people think the world was made from unformed matter or from nothing understood as privation. He writes in Book Three:

But concerning those who think that the world was made from that nothing which means the privation or absence of the whole of essence [*de eo nihilo quod totius essentiae priuationem significat*] I do not know what to say. For I do not see why they do not bethink them of the nature of opposites [*oppositorum naturam*]. For it is impossible that there should be privation where there is not possession of essence. For privation is the privation of possession and therefore where possession does not precede privation does not follow. How, then, do they say that the world was made from privation? (*Peri.* III.686a)

Eriugena thinks the only answer (if one does not accept privation or absence) is to recognise this nothing as God:

But if one should say that neither deprivation of possession nor the absence of some presence is meant by the name ‘Nothing’ [*nihili nomine significari*], but the total negation of possession and essence or of substance or of accident or, in a word, of all things that can be said or understood, the conclusion will be this: So that is the name by which it is necessary to call God, Who alone is what is properly meant by the negation of all the things that are, because He is exalted above everything that is said or understood, Who is none of the things that are and are not [*qui nullum eorum quae sunt et quae non sunt*], Who by not knowing is the better known [*qui melius nesciendo scitur*]. (*Peri.* III.686c–687a)

Note that again Eriugena invokes Augustine’s *De Ordine* II.44.

Eriugena embarks on a long discussion about the location and status of the ‘Primordial Causes’ that produce the visible effects of this created order and he locates them in the divine Word (*Verbum, Logos*). God then already contained all the causes – but they are

in him as a seamless unity – as the infinite radii belong to the circle and radiate from the central point. God then causes the world to come to be not from nothing understood as privation but from the superessential nothingness of his own being. *Ex nihilo* means *ex deo*. Creation then is really the self-manifestation of the divine, a divine theophany, an *exitus* or *proodos* from its own nature. The transcendent God is unknown and unknowable but can be known through his theophanies or divine manifestations. God radiates outwards from God's 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 (*Peri*. I.455b), that is, God manifests Himself in an infinite series of revelations or theophanies. Furthermore, Eriugena defines theophany as divine manifestation *theophania, hoc est dei apparitio, Peri*. I.446d). This self-creation is understood by Eriugena as a self-expression, a 'speaking of the Word' a 'divine cry' (*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. Eriugena summarises creation as *manifestatio in aliquo*. God's act of self-manifestation is at the same time the creation of all things, *Periphyseon* I.455b:

For when it is said that it creates itself [*se ipsam creare*] the true meaning is nothing else but that it is establishing [*condere*] the natures of things. For the creation of itself, that is, the manifestation of itself in something [*hoc est in aliquo manifestatio*], is surely that by which all things subsist [*substitutio*]? (*Peri*. I.455b; Jauneau 1996: 22, ll.553–7)

Eriugena says at *Periphyseon* Book Three 633a–b, in a section that is entitled 'on theophanies' (*de theophaniis*):

For everything that is understood and sensed [*quod intelligitur et sensitur*] is nothing other but [*nihil aliud est*] the appearance of what is not apparent, the manifestation of the hidden [*occulti manifestatio*], 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 [*inintelligibilis intellectus*], the body of the bodiless, the essence of the superessential [*superessentialis essentia*], the form of the formless . . . (*Peri*. III.633a–b; Jauneau 1999: 238–40, ll.1057–73)

At Book Three 633d Eriugena speaks of the 'ineffable diffusion' (*ineffabilis diffusio*) of divine goodness into all things that is responsible for the creation of all things: ' . . . this ineffable diffusion both makes all things and is made in all things and is all things' (*Peri*. III.634a). Eriugena describes this creative motion paradoxically as 'mobile stability and stable motion' (*status mobilis et motus stabilis*; *Peri*. III.633d). This motion is described in almost Hegelian fashion as 'from itself in itself back to itself' (*a se ipsa in se ipsa ad se ipsam*) [in an addition added in the text of Rheims in Eriugena's supposed autograph]:

For the motion of the supreme and threefold and only true Goodness, which in Itself is immutable [*immutabilis motus*], and the multiplication of its simplicity [*simplex multiplicatio*], and Its inexhaustible diffusion from Itself in Itself back to Itself [*et inexhausta a se ipsa in se ipsa ad se ipsam diffusio*], is the cause of all things, indeed is [*est*] all things. (*Peri*. III.632d; Jauneau 1999: 238, ll.1035–40)

Outside it there is nothing and it possesses and circumscribes all things.

In *Periphyseon* Book Three 688a, Eriugena returns again to give a recapitulation (*recapitulatio, anakephalaiosis*) as to why the fourfold division (*quadripertita totius naturae discretio*) applies to God. Eriugena says the intellect is moved in one way when it contemplates God as beginning, and in another way when it sees God as medium, and in another way as end (*Peri.* III.688b). Eriugena is clearly endorsing a perspectivist account of being and non-being – which is in line with his recognition that there are an infinite number of revelations of theophanies of the divine One. Furthermore, Eriugena thinks that all things shall be unified in God – just as the stars are converted into light when the sun rises (*Peri.* III.689a). Eriugena's fifth book of the *Periphyseon* deals with this return of all things to the One, when, in the end, God shall be 'all in all' (*omnia in omnibus*).

Conclusion

The Neoplatonic tradition is the dominant intellectual tradition for the whole of the Middle Ages from St Augustine to Ficino and Nicholas of Cusa, especially useful for expressing the transcendence and infinity of the divine nature and the total dependence of created nature on its divine source. No more fitting encapsulation of these concerns can be found than in the work of John Scottus Eriugena, who, I have argued, is a pivotal figure for medieval Neoplatonism. His fourfold division of nature is a kind of anagram for thinking the nature of the divine as both being and non-being under different modes of contemplation, as we have seen. But, furthermore, Eriugena offers an extraordinary and original account of the divine nature as a transcendent 'nothing' (*nihil*). The concept of 'nothingness' has a long and still under-explored history in Western philosophy beginning with Parmenides and reaching a high point in Greek-Roman pagan philosophy with Plotinus, Porphyry and Proclus. But the study of 'nothing' received a further boost from Christian philosophy seeking to accommodate the notion of creation from 'nothing' and to repudiate the Manichees and others who maintained that creation took place from a pre-existent matter. Augustine and others sought to distinguish '*nihil*', '*tenebrae*' (darkness) and *materia informis*. Eriugena inherits this discussion – extended in Carolingian times by Fredegisus and others. But the relatively Aristotelian categorial and grammatical context (*materia informis*) is completely disrupted by Eriugena's discovery of Dionysius, whom he quotes extensively. Eriugena is rightly seen as developing the first true *summa* of the Middle Ages, paving the way for scholasticism, by offering a systematic meontological account of 'nature' according to four divisions which deals with the central topics of being and non-being, and shows the consistency between the Greek and Latin authorities, while strongly articulating a Neoplatonic vision. Eriugena's account of the divine nothingness inspired mystical thinkers in the later medieval period, especially Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa, and has attracted the interest of Japanese Buddhist scholars in recent decades.

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