Eriugena on the Five Modes of Being and Non-Being: Reflections on his Sources

Dermot MORAN, Boston College and University College Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

In this article I examine the 'five modes' (*quinque* modi) of being and non-being of the ninth-century Irish Carolingian philosopher, Johannes Eriugena, as outlined in his dialogue, *Periphyseon*, especially in Books One and Three. Eriugena's immediate Latin sources have been suggested as Augustine, Marius Victorinus, and Fredigedus, but he was also deeply influenced by passages in the Greek Christian Fathers, especially Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius, and Maximus, particularly on God as 'beyond being', or as 'non-being', or 'nothingness' (*nihilum*). In this essay, I will review Eriugena's bold and paradoxical claims about the non-being of the divine being and I shall evaluate the current research concerning its sources and its originality, and make the claim that the divine nothingness is Eriugena's original contribution in the *Periphyseon*.

Introduction: Original Themes in Eriugena

There are many themes that are original with Johannes Eriugena (c. 800 – c. 877 CE), the ninth-century Irish philosopher who taught at the court of Charles the Bald, most famously his 'fourfold division of nature' (*quadriformis divisio*, *Peri.* II.524d; *quadripertita totius naturae discretio, Peri.* III. 668a; *universalis naturae universalis diuisio, Peri.* II.523d), that opens the *Periphyseon*[1] and has no *exact* counterpart in any classical author. Other concepts original to Eriugena include: his concept of God's own self-creation in his

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[1] The traditional edition of Eriugena's *Periphyseon* 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 Jeauneau, *Iohannis Scotti seu Eriugenae Periphyseon curavit Eduardus A. Jeauneau*, 5 vols, Corpus Christianorum Continuation Mediaevalis (= CChr.CM) nos. 161, 162, 163, 164, and 165 (Turnhout, 1996–2003). The *Periphyseon* (hereafter '*Peri.*') is cited according to the following translations: I.P. Sheldon-Williams, ed., *Iohannis Scotti Eriugenae Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae)* Book One (Dublin, 1968); Book Two (Dublin, 1970); Book Three, with John O'Meara (Dublin, 1981); Book Four, ed. E. Jeauneau (Dublin, 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, 1987). For more on Eriugena's life and writings, see Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena. A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge and New York, 1989) and the classic study by Dom Maïul Cappuyns, *Jean Scot Erigène: sa vie, son œuvre, sa pensée* (Louvain, Paris, 1933).

movement from darkness to light; his concept of divine self-ignorance;[2] and his conception of creation as divine self-manifestation. In this paper, I will focus on another original claim, namely, that God may be considered 'non-being'; that 'non-being' is one of the divine names. In his discussion of the divine transcendence and non-being, Eriugena navigates between and synthesizes harmoniously Greek Eastern Christian authorities (chiefly Dionysius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus Confessor), on the one hand, and Latin Roman Christian sources, especially Augustine, on the other (possibly Alcuin or Fredegisus).[3] But, going well beyond his sources, it is my contention that Eriugena developed, to borrow a term from Schelling, a most radical and complex *meontology*, *i.e.* a discussion of the various meanings of 'non-being'. Eriugena's metaphysical and meontological abilities soared way above his contemporaries and he offers the most extensive discussion of the relation between being and non-being in early medieval Latin philosophy, far outstripping what was available from Augustine, Boethius, Fredigesus and Alcuin, and his conception of divine nothingness had a powerful impact on later figures such as Meister Eckhart and Nicolas of Cusa. Indeed, Eriugena's complex dialectical metaphysics offers a sophisticated way of talking about the divine that has continued relevance in contemporary theology.

God as Nothingness

In Book Three of his famous dialogue *Periphyseon*, 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 οὐδέν).[4] Indeed, there is a chapter title, '*de nihilo*', in *Periphyseon* III 634a, according to Versions One and Two (the titles were added in the hand of i[2] [Jeauneau think i[1] is Eriugena's own hand] and it becomes '*de quali nihilo fecit deus omnia*' ('concerning the kind of nothing from which God made all things' in Version Three (Rheims Ms. 875 is the basis for Version Two, to be found in Jeauneau's edition, CChr.CM 163:, 244, l. 1135).

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[2] Donald F. Duclow, 'Divine Nothingness and Self-Creation in John Scotus Eriugena', *The Journal of Religion* 57 (1977), 109–23. See also B.J. McGinn, 'Negative Theology in John the Scot', *SP* 13 (1975), 232-8.

[3] See Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, (Louvain, 1995), and the classic study by Joseph Koch, 'Augustinischer und Dionysischer Neuplatonismus und das Mittelalter', *Kantstudien* 48 (1956–1957), 117–33, reprinted in W. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus in der Philosophie des Mittelalters* (Darmstadt, 1969), 317–42.

[4] Eriugena is translating the neuter pronoun and adverb οὐδέν (*ouden*) meaning 'in no way', 'not at all', or 'nothing' as *nihil*. Forms of οὐδέν appear in the New Testament 85 times (in the 4 Gospels), so Eriugena has some scriptural basis but of course he exaggerates it to suit his own needs.

Later, in *Periphyseon* Book Five, Eriugena, in his discussion of the cosmic return, says he is inspired by Dionysius' *Divine Names* to name God as non-being (*Peri.* V 897d): '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' (*super esse, superessentialis, Peri.* V 898b-c). In fact, Dionysius does not exactly say that God may be called 'non-being'. This is Eriugena's own radical interpretation. For Eriugena, this infinite divine non-being is the ultimate stage of the cosmic odyssey, a Godhead contemplated outside of its relation to created being (from which every ontological concept of being is derived). God is the Good that is 'beyond being', the 'superessential Supreme Good' (*summum bonum superessentiale, Peri.* III 650b) as he puts it in Book Three. God is 'beyond all that is and is not' (*ultra omnia quae sunt et quae non sunt, Peri.* III 681c).

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 what I.-P. Sheldon-Williams, following Gustavo Piemonte, calls a 'little treatise' on the *quaestio de nihilo* (*Peri* III, p. 5 n. 1).[5] Similarly the late Édouard Jeauneau, in his Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis (CChr.CM) edition of *Periphyseon* Book Three, singles out Eriugena's concept of '*le Néant divin*' (Jeauneau, *Periphyseon*, CChr.CM 163: ix).[6] Eriugena's discussion is complex and many-sided. In an interesting article, for instance, Marcia Colish has claimed the main function of Eriugena's discussion here is to distinguish two concepts of the monad: the Neo-Pythagorean (monad is the principle of all numbers, from which they emanate and to which they return) and the Neoplatonic (the Monad is to be identified with the deity).[7] According to Colish, Eriugena affirms the Neo-Pythagorean approach (found in Martianus Capella and Boethius) and rejects the Neoplatonic account. Colish also says that Eriugena is refuting the interpretation of *nihil* as the *privation* of being (absence of species, accidents, *habitus*). There is a nothingness prior to creation which cannot be understood in terms of privation. But the nothingness before creation also cannot be identified with the monad. The monad is created and eternal and hence is a Primary Cause. But Eriugena's account of 'nothingness' is a much richer theme and runs through the whole dialogue.

Eriugena will go so far as to argue that *all* things can be thought of as 'nothingness' in one form or another: God, the Primordial Causes (*causae primordiales*), created entities, corporeal things, unformed matter (*materia informis*). Eriugena's

[5] Gustavo Piemonte, 'Notas sobre la *Creatio de Nihilo* en Juan Escoto Eriúgena', *Sapientia* 23 (87) (1968), 37-58.

[6] See also Édouard Jeauneau, 'Néant divin et théophanie', *Langages et philosophie: Hommage à Jean Jolivet*, éd. Alain de Libera et al (Paris, 1997), 331-7.

[7] Marcia Colish, 'Mathematics, the Monad, and John the Scot's Conception of *Nihil*', *Knowledge and the Sciences in Medieval Philosophy: Proceedings of the 8th International Congress of Medieval Philosophy*, SIEPM (1990), vol. 2: 445-67.

great innovation, besides his transmission of the Dionysian negative theology into Latin, was his application of the Dionysian Neoplatonic understanding of the divine as 'beyond being and non-being' to interpret the meaning of the 'nothing' from which all things are created (first found in 2*Maccabees* 7:28: 'Consider everything you see there, and realize that God made it all from nothing, just as he made the human race').[8]

Eriugena's discussion of nothing is subtle and many-sided. He himself – right at the outset of *Periphyseon* Book One – offers a complex hermeneutics of how we should talk about nothing. There are different approaches – he speaks of two and even five ways of understanding nothing – in his '*duplex theoria*' and in his 'five modes of interpretation' (*quinque modi interpretationis*) of the opposition between being and non-being. But first let us recall where Eriugena describes God as '*nihilum*'. I do not believe commentators have taken these five modes of interpretation seriously enough. The outcome is that ontology, the claim about what is really being, is relativized to one's outlook or contemplation. Being in some respect is dependent on being known, and for this reason, I interpret Eriugena aas belonging to the idealist tradition.[9]

Eriugena Claims that God is Named '*Nihil*' in the Scriptures

Eriugena frequently calls God by the name '*Nihil*'. In the *Periphyseon* the question is posed: '*Cur Nihil Vocatur*?', 'Why is [God] called by the name of nothingness or not-being?'. Eriugena makes clear what 'nothingness' he is talking about, in *Periphyseon* Book Three:

By saying these things we are not refuting the interpretation of those who think that it was from the nothing by which is meant the privation of all possession [*de nihilo quo totius habitudinis priuatio significatur*] that God made all things, and not from the Nothing [*de nihilo*] by which is meant by the theologians the Superessentiality and Supernaturality of the Divine Goodness [*superessentialitas et supernaturalitas diuinae bonitatis*]. 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 [*saepe*] in the Scriptures [*in scripturis*] God Himself is called by the name Nothing [*eo uocabulo, quod est nihilum, saepe in scripturis ipsum deum uocari*]. (*Peri.* III 684d-685a; Jeauneau, CChr.CM 163: 93, ll. 2716-2720).

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[8] É. Jeauneau, 'Néant divin et théophanie', *Langages et philosophie* (1997), 331-337, see especially 332: 'Mais Erigène innove, quand il applique cette notion du Néant divin à la doctrine de la création ex nihilo'.

[9] See D. Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena* (1989); and *id.*, 'Idealism in Medieval Philosophy: The Case of Johannes Scottus Eriugena', *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 8 (1999), 53–82.

Note that Eriugena thinks that the Scriptures 'often' (*saepe*) call God 'not being' (*Peri.* III 684d-5a) and the 'theologians' gloss this as meaning 'beyond being' or 'more-than-being' ('*hyper ousia*' or '*hyper-on*', *superessentia*). He does not name these theologians but he usually means Dionysius, Gregory, Maximus or Augustine, although as we shall see Marius Victorinus has also been proposed.

Later in *Periphyseon* Book Five, Eriugena says again: 'according to the super-essentiality of His nature, He [God] is called "nothing"' (*propter superessentialitatem suae naturae nihil dicitur*, *Peri.* V 897d). Likewise, in his *Expositiones*, – his commentary on Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy* – Eriugena expresses very clearly that *ex nihilo* means *ex deo*:

We believe that God made all from nothing [*de nihilo*]. What must be understood by this, if not perhaps that this nothing is He Who, being exalted as superessential above all things and glorified beyond every word and every thought, is called, not without reason, nothing through excellence [*nihil per excellentiam*] since He cannot be in any way any one of the things in the category of the things that are? ... (*Expositiones in Hierarchiam caelestem* IV, 72-82; CChr.CM 31, p. 67; my translation)

This is a constant refrain of Eriugena. Thus, in *Periphyseon* Book One, God's superessentiality is understood as the 'negation of essence' (*negatio essentiae*):

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

God then is the negation of 'being' (*essentia*, οὐσία, *ousia*). God is not a being, an *aliquid*, not a something or other. Thus, in a manner that will be taken up later by Meister Eckhart, Eriugena says that God is 'not this nor that nor anything' (*nec hoc nec illud nec ullum ille est*, *Peri.* I 510c).

The Viewpoint Approach: Eriugena's *'Duplex Theoria'*

Eriugena builds his cosmological and ontological framework on this potent idea that the same 'entity' can be understood in different ways depending on how it is viewed. This is Eriugena's '*duplex theoria*' – which, of course, is also operative for understanding the *quadriformis divisio* of nature. As Werner Beierwaltes has shown, Eriugena frequently speaks more generally of '*duplex theoria*', a two-fold way of viewing.[10] Eriugena believes we can think about nothingness from different standpoints ('*theoriai*' or '*contemplationes*'). Eriugena usually takes a two-fold dialectical approach to the meaning of nothing: *Nihil* means either *nihil per privationem* or *nihil per excellentiam*. Eriugena

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[10] Werner Beierwaltes, '"*Duplex Theoria*": Zu einer Denkform Eriugenas', in W. Beierwaltes (ed.), *Begriff und Metapher*: VII. Internationales Eriugena-Colloquium, Sitzungsbericht der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften (Heidelberg, 1990), 37–64.

often contrasts the understanding of something *per privationem* with *per excellentiam* (see *Peri.* I 500a-b; I 502a; III 634a-b; III 663c; III 667a; IV 825c; V 966b.; *Versio Dionysii Praefatio* PL 122, 1035a-1036a). At Book Two he speaks of the '*duplex intentio*' of the human mind that separates the First and Fourth division which are one in God (*Peri.* II 527b):

In God, therefore, the first form is not distinct from the fourth. For in Him they are not two things but one; in our contemplation [*in nostra uero theoria*], however, since we form one concept of God from consideration of Him as Beginning and another concept when contemplating Him as End, they appear to be as it were two forms, formed from one and the same simplicity of the Divine Nature as a consequence of the double direction of our contemplation [*propter duplicem nostrae contemplationis intentionem*] (*Peri.* II 527b)

But the double contemplation is actually a shorthand for an even more layered approach. Right from the opening of his *Periphyseon*, 'nature' (*physis, universalis natura*) – 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), leading Eriugena immediately to a discussion of the meaning of being and non-being in relation to what he explicitly calls 'five modes of interpretation' (*quinque modi interpretationis*, I 443a), to which we shall return.

Eriugena often returns to discuss the various ways under which things can be approached and interpreted – various '*theoriae*' or '*contemplationes*' or '*considerationes*'. Of course, St. Paul and St. Augustine are Eriugena's sources for this twofold mode of viewing. For Paul, we can approach matters *carnaliter* and *spiritualiter* (*Rom.* 8:6) as the *homo inferior* or as *homo superior*. And Eriugena, in *Periphyseon* III 688b-c, cites Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* Book Eight (Viii.3) as stating that only purified minds – and not minds tarnished by earthly desires – could grasp the 'causes of all things'. To be able to grasp the way things truly are, the true ontology, one needs a spiritual or intellectual mind, one released from carnal imagination.

Again, in *Periphyseon* Book Three, 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; II 527b). Similarly, the second and third divisions of nature imply that we can contemplate things in their Causes or in their Effects. This 'modes of viewing' approach, 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 created; 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 He is each one depending on how He is approached – as Creator, as Incarnate in the Son, as Spirit in the universe, or as transcendent hiddenness and darkness outside of all reference to creation. The divine Godhead is all of those things.

Eriugena applies the 'two-fold intellection' (*duplex theoria, contemplatio*) to understanding the divine 'nothingness' several times (*duplex intentio nostrae*

contemplationis, *Peri*. II 527b; *duplex consideratio*, *Peri*. II 527d). God can be thought of as Beginning or as End; as Cause or as Effect.

For instance, in *Periphyseon* Book Three, Alumnus asks at the beginning of the 'treatise on nothing' (the chapter entitled '*de quali nihilio fecit deus omnia*'):

Alumnus: 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 [*priuatio totius essentiae uel substantia*] or substance or accident, or the excellence of the divine superessentiality [*diuinae superessentialitatis excellentia*]. (*Peri*. III 634a-b; Jeauneau CChr.CM 163: 244, ll.115-21)

Nutritor says that he does not easily concede the God is called 'nothing' by privation but that God is legitimately called 'nothing' because He is 'more than being' (*plus quam esse*, *Peri*. III 634b). God's 'ineffabile excellence and incomprehensive infinity' (*Peri*. III 634b) means that He can be said *not to be*, but it does not follow that he is 'nothing at all' or 'mere nothing' (*omnino nihil*), nothing understood through the stripping away of all predicates (qualities, essence). God is not *omnino nihil* or *nihil per privationem*, but *nihil per excellentiam*.

Obviously, this two-fold viewing approach has a long history in philosophy since Plato's *Parmenides* and the *Enneads* of Plotinus. The opposition between absolute non-being and relative non-being can be found in Plato's *Sophist* 236c-D and in Aristotle's *Physics* I 3.18. But Eriugena is a philosopher who thinks of all reality (both being and non-being) – to which he gives the name 'nature' is being many layered and as capable of being apprehended in different ways from different points of view. God is both form and formlessness:

For every formed thing seeks Him while in Himself He is infinite and more than infinite, for He is the Infinity of all infinities [*infinitas omnium infinitatum*]. Therefore, not being defined or constricted by any form, since He is unknowable to every intellect, He is more reasonably called formless than form [*informe quam forma*], for, as has often been said, we can speak more truly about God by negation than by affirmation ... *Peri*. II 525a.

The Fives Modes as 'Contemplations' of Nature

At the outset of *Periphyseon* Book One, Eriugena claims there are at least five ways of understanding the contrast between being and non-being. In *Periphyseon* Book One, when he introduces the five modes, Eriugena says 'keener reasoning' (*indagatior ratio*, *Peri*. I 446a) can discover other modes besides these. In other words, although he initially outlines *five* (*quinque*) modes, others could be found with deeper research (*Peri*. I 446a). Indeed, the word *quinque* is an addition or emendation to the Rheims 875 manuscript, possibly

in Eriugena's hand.[11] It is entered into the main text in subsequent manuscripts (*e.g.* Bamberg and Paris 12555). The exact number of modes is not especially significant, according to my analysis; it can ultimately be reduced to two, according to the *duplex theoria*. Indeed, the first mode has priority – all things comprehended by sense or mind are and therefore what exceeds them are not. It can also be expanded to be a *multiplex theoria*. There are as many theophanies as there are radii of a circle – actually an infinite number of 'contemplations'.

The claim that there are at least *five modes of interpretation* is novel to Eriugena (perhaps there is a foreshadowing in Marius Victorinus who has four different levels). Of course, Eriugena found the concept of *five levels or stages* of the cosmic return in Maximus Confessor. Eriugena is well aware of Maximus' progression whereby male and female will be reunited, then body will be drawn back into mind, earth into paradise, and the temporal world can be enfolded in eternity (Eriugena regularly invokes Maximus's I *Ambigua* xxxvii on the return, see *Peri.* II 532a-536b). In Book Five V 876a, Eriugena refers to five stages of the return of human nature from Maximus's I *Ambigua* xxviii (body dissolves into 4 elements in death, they are reunited in the resurrection, body is transmuted into soul, soul reverts to its Primary Cause, and finally the Causes are absorbed into God, as 'air into light' (*Peri.* V 876a-b).

Eriugena's key idea is that God reveals Himself in his theophanies and these infinite theophanies are a kind of ladder that the mind can ascend contemplatively to return to God. At each level, the ontological landscape will appear differently until all becomes One in the divine darkness.

The Fundamental Distinction: The Things that Are and Are Not

As is well known, the *Periphyseon* begins with a radical claim (*Periphyseon* I 441a): Nature can be defined to include 'all things that are' (*ea quae sunt*) and 'all things that are not' (*ea quae non sunt*) The phrase *ea quae sunt et ea quae non sunt* appeared earlier in Marius Victorinus, but the expressions '*ea quae sunt and ea quae non sunt*' or '*omnia quae sunt et quae non sunt*' appear so regularly in Eriugena, it can serve as an identifying marker for his work. The phrase appears already in Eriugena's first work, *De diuina Praedestinatione*[12]

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[11] Jeauneau calls this manuscript Version Two and identifies the hand as i[1], CChr.CM 161, p. xxiii. See also É. Jeauneau and Paul Dutton, *The Autograph of Eriugena* (Turnout, 1996).

[12] See Goulven Madec, ed., *Iohannis Scotti de divina praedestinatione*, CChr.CM Series Latina 50 (Turnholt: 1978). The *De praedestinatione* has been re-edited and commented by Ernesto Mainoldi, who puts particular emphasis on the book as an exercise in dialectic, see E. Mainoldi (ed.), *Giovanni Scoto Eriugena, De praedestinatione liber: Dialettica e teologia al apogeo dell rinascenza carolingia (edizione critica, traduzione e commento)* (Florence, 2003). The English translation is by Mary Brennan, *John Scottus Eriugena. Treatise on Divine Predestination*, with an Introduction by Avital Wohlman (Notre Dame, 1998).

(*Praef.* 60-5, PL 122, 327d); in his *Homilia* (I 6; I 8-12; VIII 12-4)[13]; in the *Expositiones* IV 78-9;[14] and in his Preface to the translation of Maximus's *Ambigua*,[15] where he uses a mixture of Latin and Greek: '*On quod, quod non On, denegat omne simul*'; and, occasionally, the phrase occurs even in his poems, *Carmina*.[16] Thus, in the *Homilia*, Eriugena speaks of the eagle flying above '*omnia quae sunt et quae non sunt*' (Hom. I 5, 283b, Jeauneau, p. 202). Jeauneau (*Homélie*, p. 204 n. 1) notes that Eriugena admits, in his Preface to his translation of Dionysius (*Versio Operum S. Dionysii Areopagitae Praefatio*), that he is inspired by Dionysius's *Divine Names* (PL 122, 1035a-1036a) to appreciate the '*multiplex theophania*' according to which those things that are not (not by privation but by the excellence of nature) are 'more similar and nearer' (*plus similia esse et appropinquare*) to God than those things that are. In fact, Dionysius actually says that God is be "neither of the non beings nor of the beings" (*oude ti ton ouk onton, oude ti ton onton estin, Mystical Theology* 5, PG 3, 1048a).[17] For Dionysius God cannot be identified with being or any being; whereas, for Eriugena, God may indeed be identified with *non-being*, if we contemplate 'non-being' in the right manner.

Eriugena struggles with those who interpret St. Paul as saying that the elect will see God 'face to face' (*facie ad faciem*, 1*Cor.* 13:12; *Peri.* I 447b) meaning directly, without meditation. For Eriugena, God's essence is 'unknown' and 'incomprehensible' to all – not just to created beings but to God since God as infinite cannot 'comprehend' or 'circumscribe' or 'define Himself. Therefore, 'face to face', for Eriugena, means 'in the highest theophanies'. God can only be contemplated through 'theophanies'. Theophanies are God's faces. In God's house, moreover there are many mansions, and 'mansions' here means 'theophanies' (*Peri.* I 448c-d). Eriugena draws on Maximus's I *Ambigua* (PG 91, 1084c), for his treatment of 'theophanies' – these come directly from God (*Peri.* I 449a-b) and are emanations or 'willings' (*diuinae uoluntates, theia telemata*) of the divine.

[13] *Jean Scot: L'Homélie sur le Prologue de Jean*, ed. Édouard Jeauneau, SC 151 (Paris, 1969). Jeauneau discusses the circulation of the *Homilia* under the name of Origin in his recent article, 'From Origen's *Periarchon* to Eriugena's *Periphyseon*', in *Eriugena and Creation, Proceedings of a Conference to Honor Edouard Jeauneau, XI International Eriugena Conference, 9-12 November 2011*, ed. Willemien Otten and Michael Allen (Turnhout, 2014), 139–82, see especially180–1.

[14] See *Iohannis Scoti Eriugenae Expositiones in Ierarchiam coelestem*, ed. Jeanne Barbet, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis XXI (Turnhout, 1975).

[15] See Iohannes Eriugena, *Maximi Confessoris Ambigua ad Iohannem iuxta Iohannis Scotti Eriugenae latinam interpretationem*, Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca 18 (Turnout, Leuven, 1988).

[16] For a full list, see Gustavo Piemonte, 'L'expression *quae sunt et quae non sunt*: Jean Scot et Marius Victorinus', in *Jean Scot Ecrivain*, ed. G.–H. Allard (Paris, Montreal, 1986), 81-113, especially 82 n. 1.

[17] I.-P. Sheldon-Williams, 'Eriugena's Greek Sources', in John O'Meara (ed.), *The Mind of Eriugena* (Dublin, 1970) has shown that this is not actually found in Dionysius.

Sources of Being and non-Being in Eriugena

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 philosophy with Plotinus, Porphyry and Proclus. The study of 'nothing' received a boost from Christian philosophy seeking to accommodate the notion of creation from 'nothing' and 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 Fredigesus and others. But the relatively Aristotelian categorial and grammatical context (*materia informis*) is completely disrupted by Eriugena's discovery of Dionysius, with his concept of the superessential divinity, who is 'beyond being', who dwells in inaccessible darkness. We shall now review Eriugena's sources.

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(a) *St. Augustine on Nothing*

Eriugena first discussed 'non-being' in his *De praedestinatione* (395a ff.), where he argued that evil is to be understood as non-being and therefore it is neither created by God nor known to Him. He develops this argument further in the *Periphyseon* at II 596a-b, for example, where he argues that God's nature is simple and does not know evil; or at *Periphyseon* V 926a, where he says that God cannot be said to know the wickedness of angels or men. Of course, the Latin source of this assessment of evil is undoubtedly Augustinian. Eriugena treats 'nothing' here in the Latin sense as privation – death is a privation of life, evil is a privation of goodness, suffering is the privation of happiness. In all cases, what is deprived does not exist. Eriugena asks: 'Does 'nothing' signify anything other than the thinker's conception of the absence of essence' (*Nunquid aliud significat nihil nisi notionem cogitantis defectum essentiae, De praed.* Ch. 15. 9, 197-8, Brennan, p. 98). As Eriugena argues in *De Praedestinatione*:

God cannot be both the highest essence and not be the cause of those things only that derive from him. But God is the highest essence. He is therefore the cause of those things only which derive from him. Sin, death, unhappiness are not from God. Therefore God is not the cause of them. The same syllogism can be put this way: God cannot be both the cause of those things that are and the cause of those things that are nothing. But God is the cause of those things that are. Therefore he is not the cause of those things that are not. Sin and its effect, death, to which unhappiness is conjoined are not. (*De praed.* Ch. 3. 3, Brennan, p. 19).

Eriugena then is following a typically Augustinian line in *De praedestinatione* in order to refute Gottschalk.

Eriugena will not continue to claim that God is not the cause of things that are not, once he had been exposed to Dionysius. Eriugena was awoken from his dogmatic Augustinian slumbers by reading the *Corpus Dionysii*. 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. But it also allows him to interpret his Latin sources in a new light. For instance, Eriugena, unusually for his day, interprets Augustine as a negative theologian. He loves to cite Augustine's line that God is better known by not knowing (*melius scitur nesciendo*, see *Peri.* I 510b).[18] He often quotes Augustine's *De ordine* where Augustine praises the liberal arts for helping theology understand such issues as '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. ed. W. M. Green, CChr.SL, p. 131)

change bracket to parentheses

As Marcia Colish has pointed out, in this passage, Augustine is distinguishing between *nihil* and *materia informis*.[19] Eriugena will also distinguish between formless matter and nothing in the sense of complete absence. Zum Brunn says that the examination of 'nothingness' allows Augustine to understand the nature of evil and move away from the Manichean position that it was something existent. Certainly, Eriugena is alert to Augustine's discussions of nothingness.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine states that created being, in their being as creatures, are mere nothingness apart from God, and later Eckhart will take the same view. Eriugena concurs. Thus, in *Periphyseon* III 646b, he says that every creature considered in and through itself is nothing, and he cites a passage *insert period* from St. Augustine's *Confessions* (Book VII 11.17) which states that creatures are neither entirely being (*nec omnino esse*) nor entirely non-being (*nec omnino non esse*) (*Peri.* III 646b). 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* XII 11.14, he says that bodies may get small but will never fall away into nothingness, on their own. In his *De immortalitate animae* VII 12, Augustine says that every defect is a tendency towards nothing.

[18] Eriugena is quoting Augustine's *De ordine* XVI 44 (*Deus qui melius scitur nesciendo*). See *De ordine*, in *Oeuvres de saint Augustin. Première série. Opuscules* Vol. IV. *Dialogues philosophiques*, ed. R. Jolivet (Paris, 1948), 438.
[19] Emilie Zum Brunn, *Le dilemme de l'être et du néant chez saint Augustin des premiers dialogues aux 'Confessions'* (Paris, 1969), 27.

non-being

It is not hard to find other discussions of ~~nonbeing~~ in 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 is an astute reader of Augustine and in particular takes from him many of the distinctions he will employ in parsing the relations between being and non-being.

(b) *Dionysius on Divine Transcendence above Being and Non-being*

Dionysius woke Eriugena to both negative theology and mystical theology. Eriugena finds the ideas of the divine nothingness, and transcendence above all that is and is not, primarily in Dionysius, although Dionysius strictly speaking does not call God 'nothing'. But as we have seen in his interpretation of Augustine, Eriugena also finds the thread of mystical theology already latent in the Latin Christian tradition of Augustine. Eriugena is presumably inspired by his reading of Dionysius to reinterpret Augustine in a more *via negativa* manner.

Very early in the *Periphyseon*, at I 443b, Eriugena quotes Dionysius *Celestial Hierarchy*[20] iv.1 (PG 3, 177d1-2; Heil-Ritter, Berlin 1991, p. 20 ll. 16-7):

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; Jeauneau CLXI, p. 5, l. 61)

Eriugena will repeat this at *Peri.* I 516c; III 664b and V 903c; as well as in the *Vox spiritualis* (*Homilia*). As He is in Himself, God is comprehended by no intellect. He is equally incomprehensible from the point of view of the creature that subsists in Him (*Peri.* I 443b-c).

In *Periphyseon* Book Three Eriugena quotes a long section in his own translation from Dionysius' *Divine Names* (*De divinis nominibus*)[21] Book Five Chapters 4-5 (PG 3, 817c-820a; Suchla, p. 182, l. 17 – p. 183, l. 17) and Chapter 8 (V 8. 821d-824b; Suchla, p. 182, l. 14- p. 187 l. 12), where Dionysius speaks about 'being' and describes God as ON (ων) and also as the 'pre-being ('ante ων', *Peri.* 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, whom, he notes, identifies ON with God

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[20] *Corpus Dionysiacum II* (*CH, EH, MT, Letters*), ed. G. Heil and A.M. Ritter (Berlin, 1991); *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita. Über die himmlische Hierarchie. Über die Kirchliche Hierarchie*, trans. G. Heil (Stuttgart, 1986). Johannes Scottus Eriugena, *Expositiones in Ierarchiam coelestem*, ed. Jeanne Barbet, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis 31 (Turnhout, 1975).

[21] Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita. *De divinis nominibus*, ed. Beate Regina Suchla, Patristische Texte und Studien 33 (Berlin, 1990).

(*sic enim uocat deum*, *Peri*. III 682a, l. 2596 or so 'Dionysius calls God', Sheldon-Williams' translation). The passage from Dionysius reads[22]:

But being itself [*Esse autem ipsum*] is never bereft [*deseritur*] of all things that exist [*existentibus omnibus*]. Being itself, indeed, is from the Pre-Existent [*ex ante-existente*]; and from it is being [*ab ipso est esse*]; and ων (is) the beginning and measure before essence [*ante essentiam*] and is not itself being [*et non ipsum esse*]; and being possesses it; and ων is the substantiating beginning and middle and end both of that which exists and of age and all things; and therefore by the Oracles [*ab eloquiis*] He Who is in truth Pre-ων [*ante- ων*] is multiplied in every notion [*intelligentiam*] 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, p. 182, l. 14-p. 187 l. 12).

We have a sense of a divine being whose ineffable, infinite nature transcends all things and is in some sense ontologically 'prior to' or 'before' (*ante*) all things. I could say 'me-ontologically prior'.

Eriugena finds a Scriptural basis in what he calls the 'sacred oracles' (*sacra eloquii*) or 'sacred theology' for his application of the term 'non-being' to God. The theologians that Eriugena is invoking are Dionysus, Gregory and Maximus – the Greek Christian authorities, whom Eriugena usually prefers. In 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*). He frequently quotes 'the Apostle' St. Paul *Romans* 4:17, for example, at *Peri*. I 445c, and later, in his *Commentarius* on Saint John at 304d: 'he calls the things that are not as the things that are' (*Et uocat ea quae non sunt tanquam quae sunt*).[23] The passage in St. Paul is said about God 'the father of many nations' who gives life to the dead and can make the things that are not into the things that are.

Later at Book One I 481c, Eriugena cites 'Gregory the theologian' (*Gregorius theologus*) and Maximus Confessor's I *Ambigua* vi. 38 (PG 91, 1180b8-13)

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[22] The translation by Colm Lúibhéid reads: 'But beings are never without being which, in turn, comes from the Preexistent. He is not a facet of being. Rather, being is a facet of him. He is not contained in being, but being is contained in him. He does not possesses being, but being possesses him. He is the eternity of being, the source and the measure of being. He precedes essence, being, and eternity. He is the creative source, middle and end of all things. That is why scripture applies to the truly Pre-Existent the numerous attributes associated with every kind of being. To him is properly attributed past, present and future, came to be, coming to be, will come to be'. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Lúibhéid (New York, 1987), 101.

[23] See G. Piemonte, 'L'expression *quae sunt et quae non sunt*: Jean Scot et Marius Victorinus', in *Jean Scot Ecrivain*, ed. Guy–H. Allard (Paris, Montréal, 1986), 81-113. See also Marcia Colish, 'Mathematics, the Monad, and John Scottus' concept of *Nihil*', *Knowledge and the Sciences in Medieval Philosophy* (Helsinki, 1990), 2: 445-67.

as 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.[24]

Elsewhere Eriugena also credits Maximus (PL 122, 1196a-b), who frequently contrasts 'beings', *ta onta,* with 'non-beings', *ta me onta*).[25] John O'Meara and Gustavo Piemonte have suggested the possible influence of Marius Victorinus in this regard.[26] The original source is obviously Augustinian – especially in the *De praedestinatione*. There God is '*prima atque summa essentia*'.

(c) *Marius Victorinus's Four Levels of Non-Being*

Marius Victorinus' theological works (especially *Ad Candidum Arrianum* and *Adversus Arium*) were known in the Carolingian era and are referenced by Alcuin, for instance, and by Eriugena's supporter, Bishop Hincmar of Reims.[27] Eriugena himself never specifically names Marius Victorinus, but at least one scholar, Gustavo Piemonte, based on textual comparison, is convinced that Eriugena has access to Marius Victorinus's *Ad Candidum*. Marius has a similar set of distinctions concerning being and non-being. God is ON and the cause of being (*esse*) and non-being (*non esse*). In *Ad Candidum*, he says that God is 'above all things, all existents and all non-existents' (*Ad Cand*. 3.1. Clark, p. 61) and invokes the Greek phrase *to me on super to on* (*Ad Cand*. 14) At *Ad Candidum* 3.2.4 Marius lists four modes of non-existence. Victorinus claims that 'non-being' or 'that which is not' [*id quod non est*] can be divided according to four modes:

- 'according to negation' (*iuxta negationem*),
- 'according to being other than another nature' (*iuxta alterius ad aliud naturam*)   — *unitalicize parentheses*
- 'according which is not yet, what is futural and can be' (*iuxta nondum esse, quod futurum est et potest esse*), and
- 'according to that which is above all the things that are (*iuxta quod supra omnia quae sunt, est esse, Ad Candidum*, 3, 1-2, Clark p. 63-4; 4, 1-5; CSEL 83 (Vienna, 1971).[28]

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[24] See also Maximus, *Scholia in librum de divinis nominibus*, PG 4, 185C-88A, 244C, 253D-56A.

[25] See also Maximus, *Scholia in librum de divinis nominibus*, PG 4, 185C-88A, 244C, 253D-56A.

[26] See G. Piemonte, 'L'expression *quae sunt et quae non sunt*: Jean Scot et Marius Victorinus', in *Jean Scot Ecrivain* (1986), 89 n. 38.

[27] Pierre Hadot, 'Marius Victorinus et Alcuin', *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Litteraire du Moyen Age* [AHDLMA] vol. XXI (1954), 5-19.

[28] trans. From the French of Pierre Hadot, Marius Victorinus, *Traités théologiques sur la Trinité*, 2 vols (Paris 1960).

Piemonte sees these four divisions of Marius Victorinus as strongly reminiscent of the first three of Eriugena's *quinque modi*,[29] albeit with the fourth and fifth modes missing. Marius' fourth distinction is akin to Eriugena's first mode (where God is said not to be because is above all the things that are and are not). Piemonte even presents a table of the wordings of Eriugena and Marius Victorinus[30]. Victorinus, moreover, uses the same argument as Eriugena that privation indicates a prior possession and rejects the view that the privation of all being could be the cause of being. These are indeed remarkable textual parallels but there are also some significant differences. Chiefly, as Piemonte notes, Marius does not use the Eriugenian formulation '*per excellentiam*';[31] rather he uses '*per praelationem et per eminentiam*' (*Adv. Ar.* IV 19, 11). Marius' idea of the non-being above being ('*me on super to on*') has its source in Porphyry. Marius Victorinus operates with a fourfold division of being (also replicated in Augustine's *Confessions*) between *quae vere sunt* (*ontos onta*), *quae sunt* (*onta*), *quae non vere non sunt* (*me ontos me onta*) and *quae non sunt* (*me onta*) (*Ad Cand.*, 5 6-7). Marius declares: '*Habes igitur quattuor: quae vere· sunt, quae sunt, quae non vere non sunt, quae non sunt*' (*Ad Cand.*, 11, 1026b). There is one passage in *Periphyseon* Three (III 634b-c) where Eriugena debates whether God can be called '*non esse*' as some theologians do – and he says he will not allow that God can be called non-being on the basis of a privation; God is *plus quam esse* – possibly, Piemonte believes, the theologian to whom Eriugena is referring here is Marius Victorinus.[32]

(d) *Carolingian Discussions of Non-Being: Fredigesus*

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. With regard to Carolingian authors, it is possible that Eriugena knew the ninth-century Latin work of Fredegisus (Fridugisus, also known as Fredegisus or Fredegis of Tours, was born in England towards the end of the eighth century and died in Tours, c. 834 CE). Fredegisus was a monk, a disciple of Alcuin, and a member of the Carolingian court, holding a high rank, being tutor to Charlemagne's sister and he may have been Alcuin's successor in the palace school. His *Epistola de nihilo et tenebris* [*Letter concerning nothing and darkness*] argued that the term "nothing" must actually stand for *something*, since all meaningful terms signify some thing, as we know Augustine also believed.[33] In his letter, he

[29] G. Piemonte, 'L'expression *quae sunt et quae non sunt*: Jean Scot et Marius Victorinus', *Jean Scot Écrivain* (1986) p. 92.

[30] *Ibid.* 95.

[31] *Ibid.* 106.

[32] *Ibid.* 108.

[33] Colish writes: Concettina Gennaro, *Fridugiso di Tours e il "De substantia nihili et tenebrarum"*: Edizione critica e studio introduttivo, Pubblicazioni dell'Istituto universario di magistero di Catania,

omit needless period

asked a basic question: 'Whether nothing is anything, or not? (*Nihilne aliquid sit, an non?*). What kind of 'thing' is *nihil*? Is it a 'something'? He begins with an argument drawn from grammar. Fredegisus argues that all 'finite' nouns signify something (and *nihil*, for him, is a finite noun). Therefore *nihil* must signify something, *e.g.* a man, a stone, a tree (*Omne nomen finitum aliquid significat, ut 'homo', 'lapis', 'lignum'*). signifies something. Therefore, it is something. Colish points out the leap involved here (*Nihil autem aliquid significat. Igitur nihil eius significatio est quod est, id est rei existentis*).[34] Fredegisus then turns to Scripture and creation *ex nihilo*. *Nihil* is not *materia informis*, he says; *rather nothing must be something great* (*magnum quiddam ac praeclarum*). Fredigesus then turns to discuss '*tenebrae*' – the darkness over the waters in Genesis. This is something created. Again, if the words 'day' (*dies*) and 'light' (*lux*) signify something then so must *nox* and *tenebrae*. Furthermore, God knows the nature of this *nihil* even if humans do not. Since all created things are said to be made from nothing, Fredegisus argues, nothing must signify something great indeed. Fredegisus concludes his letter without actually identifying this 'great' non-being with God Himself, as Eriugena will explicitly do, but there is no doubt that Fredegisus'work is pointing in the direction of Eriugena's conclusion concerning the nature of *nihil per excellentiam*.

Eriugena's Five Modes of Being and Non-Being in the *Periphyseon*

Having reviewed Eriugena's sources, let us now return to the five modes that are introduced in *Periphyseon* Book One. Eriugena introduces the five modes immediately after his great fourfold division of nature. Throughout the dialogue he will invoke one or other mode (usally the first, third or fourth) but he will never return again to a systematic discussion of these modes. Nevertheless, I believe that these modes always inform Eriugena's thinking about the nature of being and non-being and when we read an ontological statement in Eriugena we should always ask – what is the mode of being that is being applied here.

(a) *The First Mode*

At the outset of *Periphyseon* Book One, for Nutritor and Alumnus, the fundamental or more primary (*primordialis*) 'division' (*diuisio*, I 443a) or 'difference' (*differentia*, I 443a) is between being and non-being. Alumnus says that

serie filosofica, saggi e monografie 46 (Padua, 1963), discusses the previous editions and the manuscripts on which they and her edition are based, 5-54, the various titles of the work, 55-6, and gives a good if not exhaustive review of the commentary it has received, 101-13.

[34] Marcia L. Colish, 'Carolingian Debates over *Nihil* and *Tenebrae*: A Study in Theological Method', *Speculum* 59 (1984), 757-95.

the first division is not just first but it is also more obscure than the others (I 443a):

Alumnus: For I see no other beginning [*ex alio primordio*] from which reasoning [i] ought to start, and this not only because this difference [*differentia*] is the first of all, but because both in appearance and in fact it is more obscure [*obscurior*] than the others. (*Peri.* I 443 ll.14-6)

The first mode is given special priority by Eriugena; he specifically calls it 'first and highest' (*primus ac summus, Peri.* I 443c). It is perhaps the most commonly invoked mode in the *Periphyseon*. This mode separates things which are comprehensible to sense and intellect from those which are beyond all human understanding and elude the grasp of the mind. As Eriugena writes in Book One:

Of these modes the first seems to be that by means of which reason convinces us that all things which fall within the perception of bodily sense or (within the grasp of) intelligence are truly and reasonably said to be, but that those which, because of the excellence [*per excellentiam*] of their nature, elude not only all sense but also all intellect and reason rightly seem not to be. (*Peri.* I 443a; Sheldon-Williams's translation)

Eriugena is here giving ontological primacy to that which is grasped by the human or angelic mind. Note that Eriugena claims that those things, which in this classification are called non-being, are in fact *higher* than being, by reason of the excellence of their nature (*per excellentiam suae naturae, Peri.* I 443a). God is said to be unintelligible in itself and also in its creatures. Thus, God and the reasons and essences of all things are among the non-beings.[35]

In fact, in this first division, Eriugena quotes Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchy* IV 1 (PG 3, 177d)[36] on the superessential nature of God, *to gar einai panton estin he hyper to einai theotes*). This is a favourite phrase of Eriugena's, which he translates as, 'the being of all things is the divinity above being' (*esse enim omnium est superesse divinitas, Peri.* I 443b). He excludes 'simple nonbeing' (*haplos me on*) from the division of things in this mode: 'For how can that which absolutely is not, and cannot be [*nam quod penitus non est necesse potest*], and which does not surpass the intellect because of the pre-eminence of its existence be included in the division of things' (*Peri.* I 443c; Sheldon-Williams' translation; Jeauneau 161: 5-6 ll. 77-9).

According to this first mode, God is not any of the things that are. The things that are, are graspable by the mind or the senses; God is not intelligible to the

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[35] To this list is added 'and matter' (*materiaque*) by a later scribe in the Paris manuscript 12964, see I.-P. Sheldon-Williams, *Iohannis Scotti Eriugenae Periphyseon* vol. 1, p. 41 n. 14 at p. 223. Matter, of course, is not non-being because of the excellence of its nature.

[36] *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita. Über die himmlische Hierarchie. Über die Kirchliche Hierarchie*, trans. G. Heil (1986); translated in Com Luibheid and P. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (1987).

mind and hence 'is not'. We are here dealing with God understood as *nihil per excellentiam,* but Eriugena has some things to say about privation in this mode also. It is notable – and Eriugena will return to this in Book Three – that, according to this mode, the primordial causes also escape the grasp of the mind. According to the First Mode, the Primordial Causes are among the things that are not. This is also the case for the Third Mode, since in that version, the actualized effects are, and their causes are not. According to the Fourth Mode, however, the Primary Causes can be said to be because they are eternal, immutable and intelligible (and also intellectual since they are one in the Logos).

(b) *The Second Mode (for created beings only)*

The second mode of being and non-being is seen, Eriugena says, 'in the orders and differences of created natures' (*Peri.* I 444a), from the intellectual powers or angels down to the lowest level of the irrational creature, whereby if a level is said *to be,* then the levels above and below it are said *not to be:*

For an affirmation concerning the lower (order) is a negation concerning the higher, and so too a negation concerning the lower (order) is an affirmation concerning the higher. … This however terminates [in] the highest negation [upward]; for its negation confirms the existence of no higher creature. … Downward on the other hand, the last (order) merely [denies or confirms the one above it, because it has nothing below it which it might either take away or establish] since it is preceded by all the orders higher than itself but precedes none that is lower than itself. (*Peri.* I 444a-c)

This second mode of speaking of being and non-being applies only to the created order and not to God. *Omnino nihil,* mere nothingness, as the lowest level is also excluded from this mode. The second mode applies exclusively to the relations between the levels in the hierarchy of created beings. The hierarchy of being and non-being, then, is not a straightforward chain of being from higher to lower, but actually is a *dialectic* of affirmation and negation. Eriugena's dialectical second mode stands in contrast to the more usual Neoplatonic hierarchy, where each level 'contains' and also 'produces' the level that is below it, in a manner which need not be strictly causal. Dionysius, for example, uses the term *hypostates* (in the sense of 'that which gives rise to' or, more literally, 'that which is placed below'; Eriugena translates this as *subsistentia*) for the level which is higher, but certainly the higher is somehow responsible for the lower. But in Eriugena's version, when the lower world is *affirmed*, the higher world is *negated.* It is according to this mode that Eriugena can say that if we assert that human nature is, then angelic nature is not, and vice versa; and similarly for 'human' and 'animal' nature. As Eriugena writes in Book One:

Thus the affirmation of 'human' (I mean human while still in its mortal state) is the negation of 'angel', while the negation of 'human' is the affirmation of 'animal' (and vice versa). For if the human being is a rational, mortal, risible animal, then an angel

is certainly neither a rational animal nor mortal nor risible: likewise, if an angel is an essential intellectual motion about God and the causes of things, then the human is certainly not an essential intellectual motion about God and the causes of things. (*Peri.* I 444b; Sheldon-Williams' translation, translation modified by Dermot Moran)

This is a strong statement of the *perspectival* approach to being and non-being and in fact places at risk the affirmative definition of man as an intellectual idea in the mind of God, which we have already discussed in detail in the preceding chapter. It is clear that this definition is now seen to need a negative counterbalancing statement, which denies the whole truth of the affirmative claim. As Eriugena says:

It is also on these grounds that every order of intellectual creature is said to be and not to be: it is in so far as it is known by the orders above it and by itself; but it is not in so far as it does not permit itself to be comprehended by the orders that are below it. (*Peri.* I 444c)

As in Mode One, being is relative to being known; ontology is made to depend on the epistemological framework. Each level knows or recognizes entities at the level below it or at the same level as having being but does not recognize entities above itself as having being. In many ways, this is a very revolutionary claim – but it fits with the overall idea of the *duplex theoria* – that being is relative to being known.

(c) *The Third Mode*

Eriugena's third mode contrasts actual from potential things. Things that are in 'the secret folds of nature' (*in secretis sinibus naturae*) are said not to be, while those things which exist are said to be. Eriugena writes:

Thus, since God in that first and one man whom He made in His image established [*constituerit*] all men at the same time, yet did not bring them all at the same time into this visible world, those who already {are becoming or} have become visibly manifest in the world are said to be, while those who are as yet hidden, though destined to be, are said not to be. (*Periphyseon* I 445a)

According to this mode, things which have their essences in the Primary Causes can be said not to be, whereas things that have continued to their effects can be said to be (i.e. the created things in this world exist).

(d) *The Fourth Mode*

This division, according to Eriugena, is found among the 'philosophers' (*philosophi*):

The fourth mode is that which, not improbably according to the philosophers, declares that only those things which are contemplated by the intellect alone truly are, while

those things which in generation through the expansion and contraction of matter, and the intervals of places and the motions of times, are changed, brought together or dissolved, are said not to be truly, as is the case with all bodies which can come into being and can pass away. (*Peri.* I 445b-c)

This is the classic contrast between eternity and the domain of coming-to-be and passing-away.[37] Platonists have always distinguished between these domains and Eriugena emphasizes that the world of genesis is the world accessible to the senses, to *aisthesis*, whereas the eternal, intelligible world is grasped by *nous* or *intellectus*.

(e) *The Fifth Mode*

For Eriugena the fifth mode of being and non-being applies only to human being. Eriugena can find a scriptural basis for this mode:

The fifth mode is that which reason observes only in human nature, which, when through sin it renounced the honor of the divine image in which it was properly substantiated [*substetit*], deservedly lost its being and therefore is said not to be; but when, restored [*restaurata*] by the grace of the only-begotten Son of God, it is brought back [*reducitur*] to the former condition of its substance [*ad pristinum suae substantiae statum*] in which it was made after the image of God, it begins to be, and in him who has been made in the image of God begins to live. It is to this mode, it seems, that the Apostle's saying refers: "and He calls the things that are not as the things that are." [*Et uocat ea quae non sunt tanquam quae sunt*, *Rom.* 4:17]

(*Peri.* I 445C-d; Sheldon-Williams' translation)

The quotation from St. Paul confirms here that Eriugena is thinking about non-being and being in terms of the difference between the life of sin and the life of grace. The fallen human is non-being and the resurrected human is being.

Tractatus de Nihilo **in Book Three**

Eriugena operates with different modes of division between being and non-being throughout the *Periphyseon*, but he does make one major attempt to clear up the confusion of meanings of the term 'nothing' (*nihil*) in a treatise on nothing in Book III.[38] 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). In this *Treatise on Nothing*, Eriugena first considers the traditional

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[37] I.-P. Sheldon-Williams, quite reasonably, references Plato's *Timaeus* 27d, 28a and 48ff., which Eriugena had available in the Latin translation of Calcidius. See Calcidius, *On Plato's Timaeus,* edited and translated by John Magee (Cambridge, 2016).

[38] See G. Piemonte, 'Notas sobre la *Creatio de Nihilo* en Juan Escoto Eriúgena', *Sapientia* 23 (87) (1968), 37-58.

view that God is not being but the privation of created being – the absolute privation of all being (*Peri*. III 634c). Alumnus states:

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)[39]

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, Peri*. l.1180). Alumnus is concerned about the status of the Primordial Causes (*causae primordiales, Peri*. 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 and so the causes come from the source which is God. Alumnus asks:

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)

There is a general principle involved:

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:

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 recognize 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*

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[39] The word 'absence' [*absentia*] is added in the text of Rheims and is marked in bold in the Jeauneau edition, 163: 248, ll.1169-1173.

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 writes in Book Two:

For what the Holy Fathers, I mean Augustine and Dionysius, most truly say about God – Augustine says that He is better known by not knowing [*qui melius nesciendo scitur*], Dionysius that His ignorance is true wisdom [*cuius ignorantia uera est sapientia*] – should, in my opinion, be understood not only of the intellects which reverently and seriously seek Him, but also of Himself. For as those who pursue their investigations along the right path of reasoning are able to understand that He transcends them all, and therefore their ignorance is true wisdom, and by not knowing Him in the things that are they know Him the better above all things that are and are not; so also it is not unreasonably said of (God) Himself that to the extent that He does not understand Himself to subsist in the things which He has made, to that extent does He understand that He transcends them all, and therefore His ignorance is true understanding; and to the extent that He does not know Himself to be comprehended in the things that are, to that extent does He know Himself to be exalted above them all, and so by not knowing Himself He is the better known by Himself. For it is better that He should know that He is apart from all things than that He should know that He is set in the number of all things. (*Peri.* II 597D–598A)

This is extraordinary – the divine ignorance is not just our limitation, our limited intellect's failure to comprehend the divine infinity, the divine ignorance pertains to God itself. God does not know *what* He is. His unlimited knowledge is that he is apart from and transcends all things.

In Book Three 688a, Eriugena offers a 'recapitulation' (*recapitulatio*, Ἀνακεφαλαίωσις, *anakephalaiosis*) as to why the four-fold division (*quadripertita totius naturae discretio*) applies to God. Eriugena thinks that all things shall be unified in God (*in deum uidilicet conuersa*) – just as the stars are converted into light when the sun rises (*sicut astra sol oriente, Peri.* III.689a). Eriugena places an enormous emphasis on a cosmic unity which dissolves all apparent differences.

Eriugena's Prayer in Book Three

In a magnificent 'prayer' (*oratio*) – he calls it such – in Book III 650b, *Deus nostra salus atque redemptio*, Eriugena calls on God who has given nature to us to bestow also grace to rescue us from our ignorance and errors and, in the elegant translation of Sheldon-Williams, 'shatter the clouds of empty phantasies (*nubes vanarum phantasiarum*) which prevent the glance of the mind (*acies mentis*) from beholding you in the way in which Thou grantest Thine invisible self to be seen by those who desire to look on Thy face, their resting place, their end beyond which they seek nothing for there is nothing beyond, their superessential Supreme Good' (*summum bonum superessentiale, Peri.* III 650b).

Conclusion

John Scottus Eriugena's *Periphyseon* is an original and radical exploration of the consequences of considering the divine as 'non-being' understood in different ways but primarily as pure 'transcendence' above 'all that is and is not'. Eriugena goes beyond all his sources including Augustine and Dionysius to make an even more radical claim: the true God is unknown and unknowable even to itself. It is first and foremost that 'which is neither created nor creates' – the fourth level of the division of nature to which all things must return. Yet this divine superessential darkness also manifests himself in theophanies which also may be called God:

For it is not only the divine essence [*essential diuina*] that is indicated by the word 'God', but also that mode by which God reveals Himself in a certain way to the intellectual and rational creature, according to the capacity of each, is often called 'God' in Holy Scripture. This mode the Greeks are accustomed to call theophany, that is, self-manifestation of God [*hoc est dei apparitio*]. (*Peri.* I 446c-d).

Eriugena's conception of the divine nothingness is his way (following the Neoplatonists) of doing justice to the infinity, incircumscribability and unknowability of the divine unity – to which even the names One and Being or Goodness are not fully appropriate. Eriugena proposes always that we need to condition and qualify our affirmations by negations and his different modes of being and non-being are a further effort to allow us to train our minds to appreciate the divine in a new and fulfilling way.